YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY okiura

THE ASTERISK WAR

05. BATTLE FOR THE CROWN

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okiura

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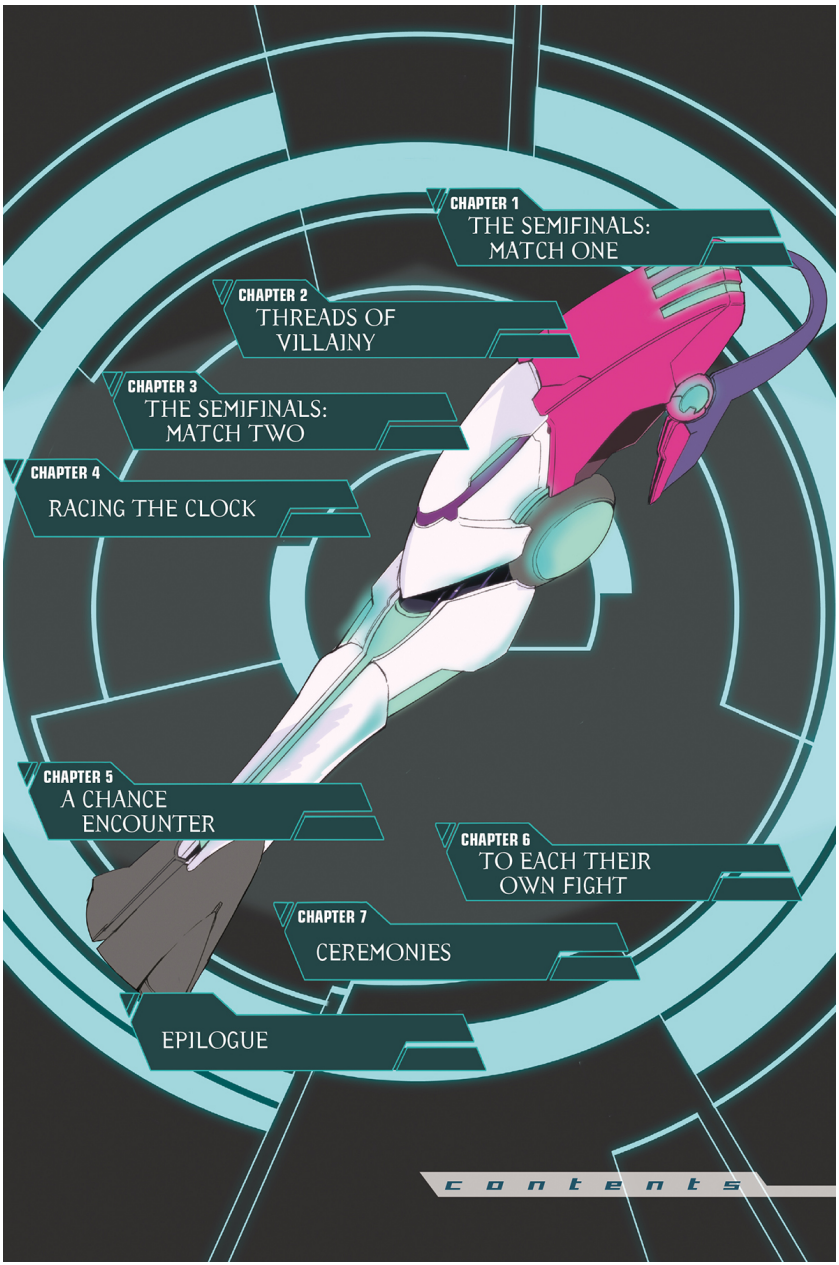
05. BATTLE FOR THE CROWN

ARDY
&
RIMCY
SAYA SASAMIYA
&
KIRIN TOUDOU
ELLIOT FORSTER
&
DOROTEA LEMUS
AYATO AMAGIRI
&
JULIS-ALEXIA
VON RIESSFELD

"Thought and memory, thou winged twins, fly, oh swiftly fly, and bring me the voice of a sweet child imprisoned."
A clear, strong voice intoned a mournful melody like a folk song.
"Beyond the clouds of dawn, upon the winds of twilight, from the edge of nightfall, lead us onward..."

THERE WERE A COUPLE OF HANGING WORK LIGHTS THAT WERE MUCH BRIGHTER THAN THE REST, HOWEVER, AND ONE OF THEM HIGHLIGHTED A SMALL GIRL. HER HANDS AND FEET WERE BOUND, AND SHE LEANED LISTLESSLY AGAINST A PILLAR.
"FLORA!"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THE ASTERISK WAR

05. BATTLE FOR THE CROWN

YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 5
YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Melissa Tanaka
Cover art by okiura

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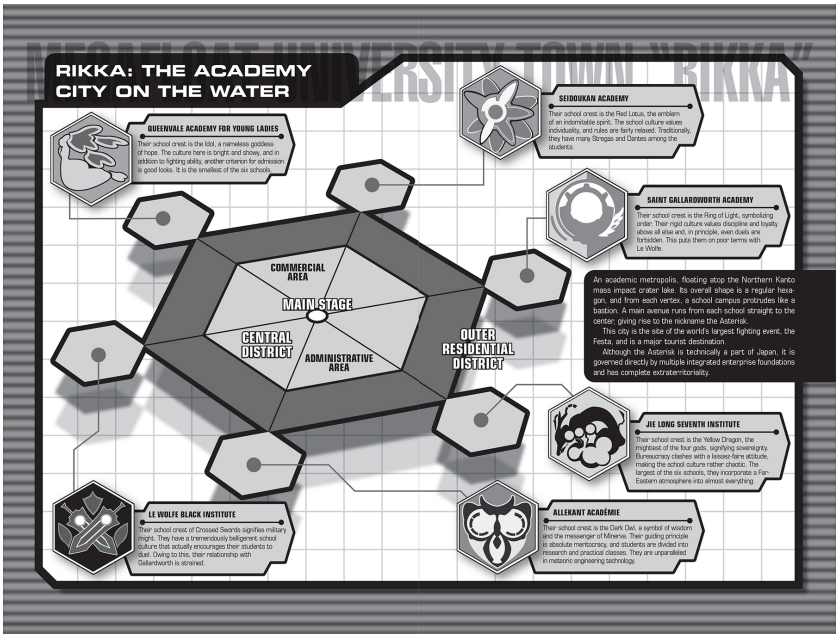

RIKKA: THE ACADEMY CITY ON THE WATER
QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES
Their school crest is the Idol, a nameless goddess of hope. The culture here is bright and showy, and in addition to fighting ability, another criterion for admission is good looks. It is the smallest of the six schools.
SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Red Lotus, the emblem of an indomitable spirit. The school culture values individuality, and rules are fairly relaxed. Traditionally, they have many Stregas and Dantes among the students.
SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Ring of Light, symbolizing order. Their rigid culture values discipline and loyalty above all else and, in principle, even duels are forbidden. This puts them on poor terms with Le Wolfe.
COMMERCIAL AREA
MAIN STAGE
CENTRAL DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE AREA
OUTER RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
An academic metropolis, floating atop the Northern Kanto mass impact crater lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname the Asterisk.
This city is the site of the world's largest fighting event, the Festa, and is a major tourist destination.
Although the Asterisk is technically a part of Japan, it is governed directly by multiple integrated enterprise foundations and has complete extraterritoriality.
JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE
Their school crest is the Yellow Dragon, the mightiest of the four gods, signifying sovereignty. Bureaucracy clashes with a laissez-faire attitude, making the school culture rather chaotic. The largest of the six schools, they incorporate a Far-Eastern atmosphere into almost everything.
LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE
Their school crest of Crossed Swords signifies military might. They have a tremendously belligerent school culture that actually encourages their students to duel. Owing to this, their relationship with Gallardworth is strained.
ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE
Their school crest is the Dark Owl, a symbol of wisdom and the messenger of Minerva. Their guiding principle is absolute meritocracy, and students are divided into research and practical classes. They are unparalleled in meteoric engineering technology.

characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI

Transferred to the high school division of Seidoukan Academy on a special scholarship. Though easygoing to a fault, he possesses an enormous amount of prana, as well as extraordinary skills with a sword.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

A princess of Lieseltania and Seidoukan Academy's fifth-ranked fighter. With Ayato as her tag team partner, she has her mind set on winning the Festa.

ALIAS: the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
LUX: Aspera Spina

CLAUDIA ENFIELD

The student council president of Seidoukan Academy and the person responsible for bringing Ayato to the school. She always has a gentle smile but describes herself as "blackhearted." She's the second-ranked fighter in the school.

ALIAS: the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
ORGA LUX: Pan-Dora

SAYA SASAMIYA

Ayato's childhood friend who lived next door to him when they were young. Perpetually sleepy and inexpressive, and a firm believer that the bigger the gun, the better. She switches between several enormous Lux firearms in a fight.

ALIAS: none yet given
LUX: type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

KIRIN TOUDOU

A first-year student in Seidoukan Academy's middle school. She became the academy's top-ranked fighter at the age of thirteen. The heir to the Toudou School, which boasts over ten thousand pupils worldwide, she has tremendous natural gifts as a swordsman.

ALIAS: the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
LUX: none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

EISHIROU YABUKI

A young man in Seidoukan Academy's newspaper club, he seems to know everything about everything. Ayato's roommate, and a member of the special ops organization Shadowstar.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Seidoukan's ninth-ranked fighter.
ALIAS: the Ax of the Roaring Distance, Kornephoros

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato's homeroom teacher. A former champion of the Gryps tournament.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR...*

The semifinals of the Phoenix Tournament are about to begin.

Saya and Kirin advanced easily, while Ayato and Julis had a tough fight against Shenyun Li, the Phantom Builder, and Shenhua Li, the Phantom Vanisher—a pair of twins from Jie Long who excel at Seisenjutsu. But with his seal broken, Ayato's strength was enough to see them to victory.

Now the first match of the semifinals is here at last. Saya and Kirin will face down Ernesta and Camilla's team in a battle that was meant to be...

CHAPTER 1
THE SEMIFINALS: MATCH ONE

"…I get it now. I see why our master Camilla holds you in such high regard, Saya Sasamiya." Rimcy slowly rose from the dust and smoke and pushed back her hair.

Saya's bullet of light had landed a direct, unmistakable hit, but her opponent showed no signs of damage.

A closer look, however, revealed that the heavy artillery Lux in Rimcy's hand was warped and crushed. She must have used it as a shield—which confirmed that she lacked Ardy's ability to generate a defensive barrier.

Judging from appearances, Rimcy was likely created for mobility and long-range attacks, whereas Ardy specialized in defense and close-range aggression.

"I have to admire your skill, controlling a highly unstable Lux with such precision. And you not only read my attack perfectly, but you countered with impeccable timing. Very impressive," she droned indifferently with an equally detached expression.

"It's just as Kirin said a moment ago," Saya answered drily, the barrel of the Waldenholt still trained on her opponent. "Your attacks are based on flawlessly accurate predictions. But that makes them easier to deal with."

"…I see," Rimcy stated with a slight frown. "But I too am able to feel this humiliation, as our master granted us personality and emotion. I've taken your words to heart."

She tossed aside the remains of her Lux. The large device on her back activated with a high-pitched hum and a green glow.

"And so, I will meet you with my full strength."

With that, another gun-shaped Lux materialized in Rimcy's right hand, and she floated softly into the air—until, all of a sudden, the green light blazed, and she rocketed upward.

"*Oh, wow— Rimcy's flying?! She's airborne!*" cried Mico, the tournament's announcer.

"Huh, so that thing on her back was an aviation unit. Now, competitors who can fly aren't all that rare, but having the skills to maneuver freely and fight at your full potential—well, that's another story, so."

As Saya listened to the commentary, she followed her opponent with her eyes.

True, some Dantes and Stregas could use their abilities for flight —Julis herself was one example. Plus, personal flight modules smaller than Rimcy's were already widely available.

But as the commentator pointed out, using flight in combat was a different matter entirely. Needless to say, taking the higher ground over an opponent would generally work in one's favor, but that advantage meant nothing if a grounded Genestella was fast enough.

Still…

"…!"

Rimcy's airborne mobility was truly astonishing. Saying that she flew like a bird would have been an understatement. It was all Saya could do to keep track of the green arcs trailing behind the Puppet.

"Here I come." A green ray streaked through the air, and bullets of light rained down after it.

Saya tried to set her aim as she dodged the barrage, but her opponent was nowhere to be seen.

It was all but impossible to capture her movements as she sped through the air. Her rapid deceleration and acceleration, which would have injured a human, made aiming especially difficult for Saya.

"…This could be trouble," Saya admitted, though a thin smile spread across her face.

Right—if this were easy, there would be no point. If the weapons of these Puppets embodied Camilla Pareto's credo, then Saya's victory lay in defeating them with her father's creations.

That was why she'd fought this far.

"*Burst*," she murmured as she poured her prana into the

Waldenholt's manadites. Massive amounts of energy flowed to the barrel of the gun, creating a limited force field. Like a glimmering shield, it deflected Rimcy's fire.

Channeling just enough prana to keep the barrier from collapsing, Saya aimed. "There."

She shot an enormous ball of light from the right-side barrel, and it easily swallowed the other girl's incoming bullet. In terms of raw firepower, Rimcy's gun didn't stand a chance against Saya's Waldenholt.

The airborne Rimcy twisted to dodge the shot, but at that exact moment, Saya fired another from the left barrel.

No matter how impressive Rimcy's aerial ability, it was possible to limit her movements by forcing her to evade. All Saya had to do was aim properly.

This was just what Kirin had said earlier: The precision with which Rimcy reacted to incoming attacks made it easy to manipulate her.

And Saya's shot was on course for a direct hit. But then—

An instant before impact, the bullet fragmented with a dull explosion.

"Hrm…?" She scowled at the sight. It should have been impossible for Rimcy's Lux to counter the Waldenholt. *How did she…?*

High on her guard, Saya strained her eyes.

The smoke cleared to reveal Rimcy holding out her left arm. It had transformed into a cannon from the elbow down, the massive barrel starkly contrasting against Rimcy's slender frame, as if her limb alone had morphed into some monstrous beast.

"Did you think that I was just a doll? That all I could do was a little flying? Even that dim-witted oaf was granted the perfect shield. Is it so strange that Master should have bestowed a fitting gift upon me?"

Even though Rimcy spoke matter-of-factly, the pride in her voice was unmistakable.

"A fitting gift, huh?" Saya muttered as she quickly scanned the data readout on her HUD. Judging from the energy flow, Rimcy's gun was not external equipment but a part of her. That meant that the energy was coming from the parallel manadites that served as her power source—which explained how its firepower could have matched the Waldenholt's.

“I suppose you could say that my Ruinsharif is the perfect spear,” Rimcy went on.

The perfect shield and the perfect spear… I’d like to see them up against each other, Saya thought. “…I suppose that will be tough to handle.”

She glanced sideways to see Ardy and Kirin locked in vicious combat near the center of the stage. Rimcy had yet to position herself so that the other two fighters were behind her, and Saya was in the same boat. They were both paying partial attention to their tag-team partners, even as they focused on each other. After all, the smallest lapse in concentration would endanger not only themselves but their partners as well.

As the teammates in charge of long-range combat, the responsibility fell naturally to both Rimcy and Saya.

“Well, I have no problem with that,” Saya challenged. “Let’s see who’s got more power.”

A straight-on fight was exactly what she’d been after this whole time.

Energy poured into Saya’s Waldenholt and Rimcy’s Ruinsharif.

“Ruinsharif—fire.”

“…Kaboom.”

Instantly, two bullets discharged from Saya’s Lux, and a stream of light burst from Rimcy’s left arm. The two projectiles clashed at the midpoint with a deafening roar; the gust from the explosion nearly blew both combatants away.

“You canceled out my shot. Impressive.”

“…Yours, too.”

Rimcy and Saya glared at each other, their hair rippling in the ensuing gust.

These two had something in common. Both were enigmatic for the most part, but inside them burned a fierce and unyielding conviction.

"……"

Neither spoke as they readied their weapons anew.

At the same time…

"Haaaah!"

"Naaaah!"

Kirin's Senbakiri arced swiftly through the air, but Ardy deflected it upward with his hammer. She rounded behind him to cut downward from on high, but his barrier blocked the strike an inch from his body. Yet the girl's sword did not pause for an instant, flowing from one attack into the next.

"*Now, at the center of the stage, we see Toudou unleashing a fierce combination attack! Ardy's managing to ward off every blow, but he seems to be completely on the defensive, unable to launch a strike back!*"

"*So this is the famous Linked Cranes technique of the Toudou style I've heard so much about. Yep, it really is impenetrable.*"

The Linked Cranes, the master technique of the Toudou style, was not one maneuver. Rather, by connecting moves together, it created an incessant series of attacks.

"Bwa-ha-ha! Your blade is truly formidable, Kirin Toudou! Your technique is divine—or rather, diabolical! To think that the likes of me would be unable to find an opening to fight back!" Ardy laughed, fending off Kirin's fierce offensive by the narrowest of margins. "Most excellent! So this is what elation feels like! I can hardly bear it! You see it, too, do you not? With every strike of yours that I defend, I learn and evolve! Wonderful! You are a peerless teacher!"

Kirin continued striking mercilessly in reply. The point of her katana was deflected by Ardy's barrier and sliced his shoulder—but the cut was shallow.

She whirled and made a circular swipe at his midsection, but his hammer blocked it as easily as if he could read the air.

Just as I thought… A pattern that he's already seen won't work.

She frowned slightly, but there was no stopping her blade. The Linked Cranes allowed her to shift into the next attack from any position or situation.

She did see the truth behind his words. As their weapons crossed, Ardy was evolving at a frightening speed. That was unmistakable.

I can't use the transition from Nine Thousand Leagues to Yoshiwara Sparrow… And I doubt that going from White Orchid to Rice-Planting Maiden would work again…

There were forty-nine connecting techniques in the Toudou style, and combining them with basic attacks allowed for countless patterns. But as Kirin's sword carved through the air, she could feel her available options gradually dwindling.

Ordinarily, defending against a technique perfectly on the second try would be near impossible. Not even Ayato could manage such a feat; human beings learned physical skills slowly through repetition.

But this opponent was different. All he needed to learn an attack was to gather data on it once.

I might have to take back what I said earlier… Kirin smiled self-deprecatingly as her Linked Cranes continued.

While she had pointed out to Ardy the weakness of his mechanical nature, his extraordinary capacity to learn was undoubtedly a strength that arose from the same source. And what was more—Kirin was now providing him with the very fighting experience that he lacked.

At first, Ardy's hammer had been simply fast and precise. But his movements were growing sharper before her eyes, his blows heavier.

Still, Kirin did not expect to lose.

The girl had no self-assurance, but she held a considerable confidence in her katana technique. It was not pride in her talents but simply faith in the training she had practiced day in and day out.

Despite Ardy's rapid progress, the gap between his and Kirin's close-range combat skills was overwhelming, not to be easily overcome.

But then—

"Still! Even if I am collecting invaluable data, such a one-sided fight does leave something to be desired…!"

With those words, Ardy body-slammed Kirin to send her flying, then held his hammer high.

Of course, against the Linked Cranes, such a brutish maneuver left a wide opening. It presented Kirin with the perfect opportunity.

As Ardy's huge war hammer came down, Kirin turned it aside so as not to break her blade, then rounded to his flank. This was not the ideal location for striking the school crest on his chest, but it was a clear shot at victory.

"I have you now!" Kirin swung the Senbakiri with deadly force.

"Hah! Very well— Do your worst!"

"Wha—?!"

Far from attempting to dodge her blow, Ardy stuck out his head to receive it. The sensation of her blade cutting metal vibrated through the sword and into her hands. She'd landed a solid blow, and yet Ardy failed to even flinch. Instead, he shook her off with his massive trunk of an arm.

Kirin had no choice but to withdraw to a safe distance and assume her fighting stance again.

Needless to say, for a human being, the head was a vital point that one would instinctively protect. But he'd used his as a shield…

"You are quite reckless," she remarked.

Before, Ayato had taken a hit from Kirin to escape the Linked Cranes. What Ardy had just done was superficially similar, yet not the same at all—a maneuver he could pull off because he was fundamentally different from a mortal.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Indeed, if I had a human body, our match would be over!" Ardy crowed. "But my body is a machine! My head is just an expendable part! You seem to have forgotten that!"

"…"

Kirin had no retort. It was just as he said.

She had been the one to point out his weakness as a machine, but at a critical moment, she had acted according to the common expectation that her opponent would be *human*. "I have much to learn as well…"

Admonishing herself, she regained her focus. The fight had only just begun.

"Well, I suppose I should thank you for giving me such valuable data," Ardy said, gently giving the wound on his head a test rub.

A neat slice from a katana was etched deep into his right eye—or where his right eye would have been, were he the type.

“Thank me…?” Kirin said dubiously.

Ardy thrust out his chest proudly. “Heh-heh…! Rimcy, now is the time to let them see it!”

*

“No.”

Rimcy, fighting Saya from above, bluntly shut down Ardy’s shout without so much as looking at him.

“And why not, pray tell?” He sounded dejected.

“I should be asking you why, you imbecile. Why would we do such a thing in the present situation? First of all, that decision is mine to make, not yours.”

As she spoke to her brother in creation, Rimcy kept her gaze fixed on her opponent.

Saya steadied her ragged breath and replied with a thin smile. “You’re still holding back?”

“This is our strategy. I am already fighting you with my full strength. Are you dissatisfied?”

“…Not at all,” Saya replied as Rimcy’s left hand—the Ruinsharif—filled with condensed energy.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

With a blast akin to a monster’s roar, a maelstrom of light large enough to swallow Saya whole rushed at her. The Waldenholt was in its cool-down phase; she wouldn’t be able to use it to counter.

As Saya rolled to dodge the shot, the ground where she’d just been standing was vaporized in an explosion.

Needless to say, a direct hit would have left even a Genestella in bad shape.

With the gun in her right hand, Rimcy mercilessly fired a barrage of light at the spot where Saya had rolled. Using the barrel of the Waldenholt as a shield, the human girl zigzagged to evade the attacks.

I knew it from the start, but I’m at a disadvantage if this drags on…

To compare the Waldenholt and Ruinsharif purely in terms of performance, the Waldenholt paled in firing rate but had a slight advantage in target accuracy. That much was probably due to the difference between them in combat experience, and indeed, Rimcy was gradually closing that gap.

The two weapons were roughly equal in firepower. Saya had yet to use the Waldenholt's maximum output, but the same was probably true of the Ruinsharif.

"What's wrong? You seem to be doing nothing but running," Rimcy said as energy filled her left arm once more.

The Ruinsharif fired roughly three times as fast as the Waldenholt—which meant that in the time it took Saya to attack once, Rimcy could attack thrice. The Waldenholt had two barrels and improved versatility, but the Lobos transition system required a cool-down interval between shots. The heat would build up with extended use, and that period would increase as the battle dragged on.

Despite this, Saya wouldn't say that her father's Lux was inferior to Camilla Pareto's work. It had catastrophic firepower that could not be achieved any other way. This weapon simply embodied the essence of that approach.

"…And I'm going to prove it," she said aloud.

Checking that her weapon was in standby mode, Saya fired several anchors to hold herself in place.

"And just what do you think you're doing? You won't be able to evade me like that."

"I have no need to dodge."

"Oh?" Rimcy's eyes narrowed. "I see. The energy output pattern is different from before. So this is your trump card."

"…"

Saya made no reply as she put the two barrels of the Waldenholt together. With a click of interlocking metal, two circuits connected into one.

This was the weapon's true form.

"Ha-ha… I must say, this all seems really silly to me—but very well. I'll play along. Let us compare our firepower again." Rimcy slowly descended to the ground, presumably to allocate the power used for her flight unit to her gun. "Ruinsharif—maximum output."

"…Full Burst."

Both weapons filled with extraordinary amounts of energy.

Miniature lightning bolts crackled around Saya, and the air itself groaned under the strain of the energy.

The slightest error in her prana control would result in the Waldenholt exploding. If that happened, Saya would not escape unscathed.

At last, the stored energy reached the critical limit, on the cusp of breaking free.

"Fire!"

"Kaboom…!"

A swirling stream of light burst from Rimcy's left arm, and a hyper-condensed shell of light shot from Saya's Waldenholt. Saya grimaced at the recoil as the anchors around her creaked.

The two shots clashed between them, just like before, and for a moment they appeared evenly matched. But then—

"What—?!"

The bullet from the Waldenholt overpowered and scattered the Ruinsharif's laser-like beam.

Rimcy turned to dodge—an instant too late. She stifled a cry, and a giant dome of light swallowed her body.

After a brief silence, the explosion that erupted might have blown away the whole arena. The raging shock wave shook through all the protective barriers surrounding the stage, enough that it threatened to break them. Screams of terror broke out from the audience.

When the explosion finally subsided, Rimcy knelt with her face twisted in agony in the center of a sizable crater. Her left arm was completely destroyed, emitting sparks and black smoke.

The Ruinsharif was disabled.

Still… Why doesn't she have any other major injuries?

Even if she had avoided a direct hit, Rimcy had suffered little damage for an explosion of that magnitude.

As Saya strained her eyes in disbelief, she spied a thin wall of light, shimmering its protection before the robot girl.

"Why, that's…"

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha!" A boisterous laugh suddenly rang across the stage. "That was very close, Rimcy!"

Ardy was standing at the rim of the crater, looking down at his partner in amusement.

"I couldn't protect you entirely, but you can't complain, right?"

"I know…" Rimcy's voice, in contrast, was bitter with defeat.

"I see. So he can generate that barrier to protect things other than himself." Saya hadn't expected this, but it made sense. What's more, the barrier looked thinner than usual, probably because the generator—Ardy—was some distance away.

"S-sorry, Saya. I couldn't quite stop him." Kirin ran up to her

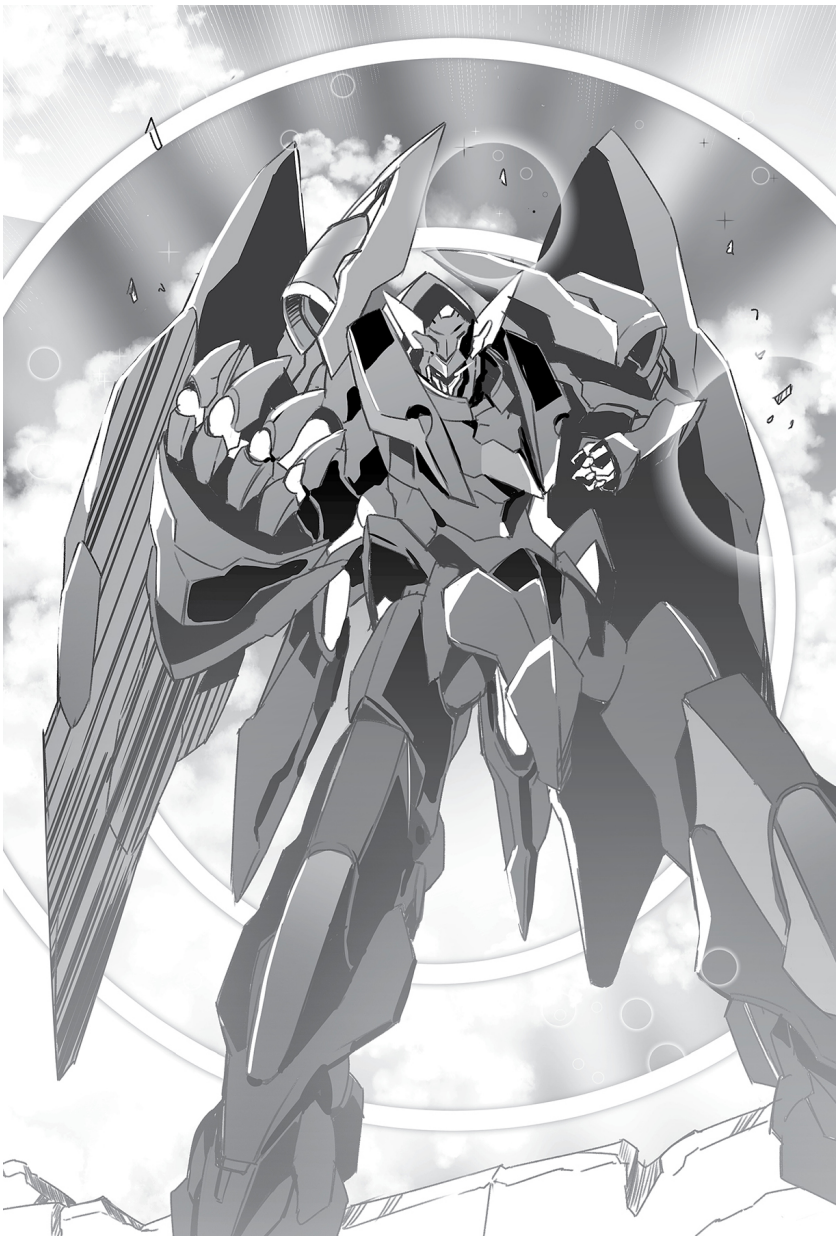
and bowed in apology.

"No, Kirin. You did a good job fighting that hulk. More than enough." Saya patted her lowered head and thanked her gently. "I couldn't finish her off, but we've basically neutralized one of them. So now it's two-on-one. We have the advantage—"

"Are you sure about that?" Rimcy interjected, standing unsteadily.

"…Hmm?"

"You did surpass me, I admit it. But that is not the same thing as surpassing *us*." She slowly looked up to her partner. "Ardy, we have little choice in the present circumstances. As much as it pains me, I'll do as you wish."



“Ho-ho, now that’s more like it! I’m ready whenever you are!”

Rimcy let out a short sigh and spread her arms. Her body emanated a manadite glow. “Purging ACM unit, first exterior armor, Luxes. Transferring limit control.”

Her flight unit and armor separated from her body and floated up as several enormous gun Luxes activated and did the same.

“Ah! Here we go, here we go, here we go!” Ardy cried. “*Commence connection!*”

Rimcy’s parts were guided toward her partner, and as the light beacons adjusted their positions…

“*Ohhhh! C-could this be—?!*” the thrilled announcer blurted.

Steam hissed from Ardy’s body, and his shoulders split wide open. Rimcy’s flight unit separated into two pieces and docked onto the opening he’d made—in other words, the Luxes and their armor attached to his arms and legs.

As his eyes shined brightly, the light pouring from his body turned from green to blue.

Was this really happening?

“They…combined?”

Saya and Kirin stared in disbelief.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Ardy crowed. “Now you gaze upon my true form!”

*

Meanwhile, in the exclusive spectator booth of Allekant Académie’s student council, Ernesta sat with her legs crossed, feet up on the seat. “Oh, boy, I didn’t think they’d get into enough of a pinch to use that. This *is* a teensy bit unexpected.”

“Are you sure this will work?” Camilla demanded with a stern look from the seat beside her.

The booth was empty except for them.

“The simulations were fine. No reason to worry.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m still regretting the decision to equip them with that thing.”

“Tee-hee. But your Ruinsharif was overpowered— Isn’t that the whole reason we’re in this situation?”

“W-well…” Camilla sheepishly averted her gaze.

“Not that there was any way around it. That Lux of Dr. Sasamiya’s does have ridiculous firepower.”

“I admit, it’s a better weapon than I expected.”

“Well, if we want to win, then we have no choice but to use it! Right? Right?”

As Ernesta’s eyes gleamed with utmost joy, Camilla let out a long sigh. “I don’t know— I can’t say that the situation looks very good. What are you so happy about, anyway?”

Giggling, Ernesta glanced back at Camilla, her expression relaxed and playful. “It’s just that my babies are growing at such an awesome speed. Really, they’ve completely exceeded my expectations. They’re *so* amazing!” She kicked her legs in sheer elation. “If they can control *that* on top of everything else, who knows what they can do?”

*

Perhaps because of the bulky equipment added onto his shoulders, Ardy seemed far more massive and imposing than before. Each arm sported a Lux resembling a gun with an enormous muzzle, and his legs had sprouted several similar weapons. He looked, literally, fully equipped.

“What do you say now?!” Ardy asked, sticking out his chest in pride. “Look at me, more majestic and dignified than ever!”

“Grrr… So freakin’ cool,” muttered Saya, which prompted Kirin to turn to her in surprise.

“Go ahead and attack me!” Ardy declared with raucous laughter, spinning his hammer lightly in his hand and then slamming the butt against the ground. It was enough to create a dent in the earth beneath him.

“I guess it’s more than just tacked-on parts,” grumbled Kirin.

“…” Saya gave her a small nod, then quickly checked the Waldenholt’s status. She’d fired it at full power, and now it needed extra time to cool down. She could switch to another weapon, but it was probably the only one in her arsenal that could break through the robot’s defensive barrier.

“Hmm… If you won’t attack, then I shall come to you.”

Saya had hoped to buy more time, but her opponent had other ideas. As Ardy held up his hammer, she braced herself. She glanced

over to Rimcy to find her completely disarmed and uninterested in joining the battle.

Then we should take advantage of the fact that it's two-on-one…

As that thought crossed Saya's mind, she was stunned to find a massive black frame before her, just like a wall.

He's fast…!

"Saya!" Kirin cried.

The hammer came down too swiftly for her to dodge—she would have been a smear if Kirin hadn't rushed in to sweep her up in her arms. The two distanced themselves from the boy to recoup, both exhaling in unison.

"Thanks, Kirin. You saved me."

"Never mind that. His movements—they're completely different from before." Kirin carefully readied the Senbakiri as she continued, sounding suspicious. "But from the looks of it, his attack is still the same. It's just his speed and power that's shot up to a completely new level…"

Saya gasped at her analysis and turned to Ardy.

The additional parts on his shoulder were a flight unit. If he was using them for propulsion, that could explain the increase in speed—but she didn't think that was all there was to it. If his overall performance had been boosted at a more basic level…

"Kirin. This is a guess, but I think I figured out his trick."

"His trick?"

"They use multiple parallel manadites as power sources. I think Rimcy gave several of her manadites over to the big one."

"Oh…"

That would explain why his basic abilities—like speed and power—had improved. "Which means…," Saya added, "that the big one must have some kind of flaw."

"A flaw?"

"If the big one could handle all the manadites without a problem, there'd be no reason for such a cumbersome system; they would've equipped him that way from the start. But they didn't, because it isn't perfect…I think."

"I see. It makes sense."

The first possibility that came to mind was that they had a time limit, like Ayato. If Ardy was now forcing a power output higher than he could normally withstand, he wouldn't last very long.

Or perhaps having Ardy in this state posed some sort of risk.

Here, too, Saya could think of several reasons why that would be—it was common for excessive power output to strain a processing system and cause it to break down.

"In any case, we don't have enough information. Kirin, can you buy us just a little bit of time?"

"All right. I'll do my best." Kirin nodded, then held the Senbakiri down at her side and took a few measured breaths.

"Hrm, are you finished with your strategy session? I thought you might try me first, Kirin Toudou."

Glaring at Ardy as he casually closed in, the swordswoman drew him step-by-step into her attack range—and the instant he set foot within her radius, she leaped at him to strike. "Hyah!"

Ardy received her backhand diagonal slash with his hammer, but the repelled blade immediately moved to the next attack. It was the Linked Cranes.

He was definitely faster, able to respond to all of Kirin's attacks. Nevertheless, he couldn't escape.

"Mm, your skill is truly excellent, Kirin Toudou…! Even now, it's impossible for me to contend with this technique." He laughed as he parried the Senbakiri. "However—!"

Blue light erupted from all over his body, creating a gust of wind.

Undeterred, Kirin continued with an overhead slash, but Ardy's hammer blocked it and then hurled her backward.

She bit back a cry of shock.

It was unbelievable. He'd broken out of the Linked Cranes *by brute force*.

Though she was just thirteen years old, Kirin was a Genestella who had endured arduous training. She had tremendous physical strength. Her blows were heavy, and most Genestella—no matter how strong—were hard-pressed just to ward them off.

A skilled swordsman like Ayato might be able to deflect Kirin's blade somewhat, but to fling her whole body was no ordinary feat. At the very least, it would be impossible for a human being.

"Bwa-ha-ha! We're not done yet!" Ardy boasted, rushing in to pursue the girl.

She tried to parry with the Senbakiri, but Kirin had just landed and was caught off-balance. She couldn't entirely handle the blow.

"Ngh!" she groaned, as the hammer swept her away once again. She slammed into the defensive barrier at the edge of the stage.

“Kirin!” Saya began to run to her, but the girl motioned her back.

“I-I’m fine,” she said, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. “But—look out!”

Turning back to Ardy, Saya saw the massive black form holding out his hammer like a gun, pointed straight at her.

A chill went down Saya’s spine as she saw an enormous mass of energy gathering at the hammer.

It’s a projectile weapon…?!

“You are formidable opponents, worthy of respect. You have taught me much. And so, I will follow one of your lessons and crush you with my full strength.”

“…That sounds like trouble. Kirin, can you move?”

“Yes!” —But Kirin winced as she tried to stand.

“Kirin…is your leg okay?”

“I-I’m fine!” Despite Kirin’s dauntless declaration, her right leg was visibly swollen. It didn’t seem broken, but the injury would make it difficult to dodge the incoming attack.

“…”

Saya silently made up her mind and joined the barrels of the Waldenholt again. It still wasn’t cooled down from the previous attack, but under the circumstances, she had no other option. “Kirin, get behind me.”

“B-but, you’ll—”

“Just do it.” There was no time to talk it over, and Saya stopped doing so. She directed her prana into the Waldenholt, instantly reaching the mana excitation threshold in the manadites and filling them with energy—but perhaps because the weapon had not cooled down sufficiently, the response was duller than usual.

It won’t charge in time…!

Just as that realization crossed Saya’s mind, Ardy’s hammer discharged.

“Wolnir Hammer, firing!”

Saya gritted her teeth in frustration, but she had to pull the trigger now. *“Full Burst!”*

The head of the hammer whirled rapidly toward the girls, but the Waldenholt’s shell stopped it at the last instant.

“Ngh…!”

Saya had no time to deploy her anchors, so she stood firm the best she could as the recoil nearly bowled her over. The shell of

light and the hammer clashed in a shower of energy sparks. But eventually, as if it had succumbed to fatigue, the shell exploded, throwing the two girls into the defensive barrier.

Still, they'd managed to block Ardy's attack. That wasn't nothing.

The hammerhead, pushed back by the explosion, returned to Ardy and found its home again at the end of the shaft as he held it aloft.

"Hmm… I did not expect you to fend off that attack," he praised. "I must say that I'm impressed."

"…" Saya stood unsteadily and glared back at him. "…Ready, Kirin?"

"Of course." Kirin rose to her feet behind her partner and readied the Senbakiri.

Kirin's voice was full of strength, but she had suffered more than a minor wound. The injury to her leg was certain to have a significant effect on a swordswoman who relied on speed as she did.

Saya's Waldenholt, meanwhile, was shorted out all over. It was no longer usable.

And yet…

Saya bit down hard on her lip, closed her eyes, and then opened them wide again. "…We can't give up."

She deactivated the Waldenholt and activated another Lux.

Type 39 Lux laser cannon Wolfdora—in terms of firepower, it was the next strongest weapon she had after the Waldenholt. She wasn't sure how effective it would be against Ardy, but she had to try.

"Will you cover me?" Kirin stepped in front of Saya, showing no hint of the injury to her leg.

"How strange. Before this match, I would have called your actions a futile gesture. But now I am struck with awe at seeing you fight to the end." Ardy's tone was uncharacteristically placid, and his whole body erupted once again in blue light.

As if on cue, Kirin and Saya split up to run in opposite directions.

…The first semifinal match concluded shortly after that.

CHAPTER 2
THREADS OF VILLAINY

"Saya! Kirin!"

Ayato burst into the prep room to find the two girls slumped on the sofa. They were swathed in so many bandages it almost hurt to look at them, but thankfully they seemed to have escaped serious harm.

"Good grief— Are you two all right? They certainly did a number on you." Julis, following on Ayato's heels, wore a worried expression that belied her harsh words.

"…No real damage. We could have kept going, if they hadn't gotten our crests," muttered Saya, looking sullen. She turned her head toward them.

Having watched the match, Ayato recognized Saya's bravado. It was more or less a one-sided affair once Ardy had combined parts with Rimcy. Not that Saya and Kirin didn't stand a chance, but the outcome had been all but decided after Kirin's injury and Saya's Waldenholt breaking down. The pair had fought fiercely after that, but Ardy's awesome strength overwhelmed them.

Still, Saya had spoken the truth, in a sense. The two had kept getting back up no matter how many times they were knocked down. If their crests had not been destroyed, they might well have kept on fighting until their bodies were.

"I never imagined the Linked Cranes could be *broken* like that…" Kirin sighed with a weak smile, her voice filled with frustration. "I'm sorry you had to see such a disappointing match. I don't know how to face Flora— She was rooting for us…"

Flora had watched the match from the general admission seats

but hadn't arrived in the prep room yet.

"It wasn't disappointing at all," Ayato said. "Besides, I don't think anyone human could break the Linked Cranes that way."

As someone who had firsthand experience being on the receiving end of the technique, he could say that much. Kirin's katana strikes were heavy to begin with, and it was all that anyone defending against the Linked Cranes could do to just deflect her attacks. Ayato couldn't even imagine how much physical strength it would take to send Kirin herself flying.

"No—I've never been as painfully aware of my own inexperience as I am now. In the end, I was relying too much on the Cranes. I have to rethink my strategy from a more fundamental level…" Kirin's voice was tight with self-recrimination as her fists clenched.

Ayato made himself swallow the words of comfort he was about to offer. Sometimes, careless consolation could drive a defeated fighter further into despair. "Anyway, you two have to rest and heal," he said instead. "Your medical exams didn't turn up anything, right?"

Those who lost a Festa match were required to go through medical examinations (while this was optional for the winners). Serious injuries could result in hospitalization, but since Genestella were such quick healers, usually only first aid was necessary.

"Nothing major," Kirin replied. "Although if I had to say, my right leg is a little…"

"Oh—does it hurt badly?" Ayato asked.

"Oh, no. The medicine is working now… But thank you for your concern." Kirin waved him off idly.

She really is brave, Ayato thought. "What about you, Saya?"

"…I hurt all over. But wrecking so many of my Luxes is far more painful."

It was an answer he might well have expected from his childhood friend.

"We'll avenge you in the final, so rest easy," Julis said. "Right, Ayato?"

"Well, sure, I'd really like to…but I can't make any promises after seeing that match." Ayato turned to her, grave.

Indeed, when it came to swordplay, Kirin was far superior to Ayato. It would not be that simple to beat an opponent who could overwhelm her—even with an Orga Lux.

“How valiant of you, Riessfeld,” Saya said in mock amazement as she sat up. “If you can say that after seeing our match, you’d have to be a real idiot, or have something up your sleeve—”

“I don’t have any ideas, not against a monster like that,” Julis said plainly.

“…So what you’re saying is you *are* a real idiot?”

“I may well be. It’s a grand slam I’m after, remember? Wouldn’t I have to be an idiot to consider a crazy fantasy like that?”

Saya’s eyes widened at that, but then she smiled drily. “…No argument from me. You can’t slip up in your first Festa, then.”

“That’s right.”

Julis offered her outstretched fist, and Saya bumped her own against it.

“…So it’s up to you,” Saya said.

“Right. We’ve got this.”

Ayato smiled faintly as he watched their exchange from the corner of his eye—then his expression quickly became serious again.

After combining with Rimcy, Ardy’s strength in the semifinal match had been otherworldly. He seemed *too* strong.

Was it really possible to become that strong simply by combining some equipment?

Something about it is familiar somehow…

As his thoughts raced, Ayato turned his gaze to the entrance. At that exact moment, in the press room down the hall, the winners’ interview was taking place.

*

“Sheesh, those reporters are so pushy, I can’t believe it. And when I have to get back to repair Ardy and Rimcy, no less,” Ernesta grumbled, skipping down the corridor to the prep room.

“…”

Even as she complained, she was smiling—in stark contrast to the silent and sullen Camilla beside her, whose shoes clacked along at a brisk pace.

Camilla had been like this since the winners’ interview began. The press must have been confused as to why a member of the winning team would be in such a foul mood.

“Come on, Camilla, aren’t you ready to cheer up yet? There wasn’t much of a choice. We might have lost if we didn’t use it.”

“…”

Ernesta stepped ahead of her tight-lipped companion and spun around to peer into her face.

But Camilla did not slow down and walked past Ernesta instead, intent on ignoring her.

Ernesta let out a deep sigh, the smile fading from her face. “… Camilla, you always knew this day would come, didn’t you?”

At that, Camilla’s steps finally paused.

It wasn’t very fair of Ernesta to bring this up, but she had to. “You and me, we’re trying to get to two different places. Sure, we’ll travel together for a while, but in the end we’ll have to go our separate ways. You knew that, and you helped anyway. Right?”

“That’s not—” Camilla turned and started to say something, but then decided against it.

Ernesta sighed again. She was grateful for her friend’s kindness, but it was time to put things out in the open. “Your ultimate objective is *perfect versatility*. Which is to say, you want to make weapons that anyone—any human at all—can wield with ease. Isn’t that right?”

“It is.” Camilla nodded after a short pause.

“But weapons like that don’t exist. They can’t. In the end, all weapons rely to some extent on the person wielding them.”

What was the solution, then? It was simple: Create a new entity

—something not human—to handle the weapon.

Puppets were the answer.

A Puppet could expertly wield any weapon, no matter how complex. All a human had to do was give an order.

"To achieve that, however," Ernesta went on, "the Puppets don't need human-level sentience. Actually, they must not have it. If they did, they'd be just the same as humans."

Ernesta's objective was different.

What she wanted was to create with her own hands entities equal to humans in every way—autonomous Puppets that could laugh, cry, rejoice, and grow.

So she trembled with emotion, watching the growth of Ardy during the semifinal match, knowing *that* was exactly what she'd been pursuing all this time.

Ernesta's ultimate objective was that, someday, Puppets like hers would earn the same rights as human beings.

With a sad, wry smile, Camilla looked at Ernesta, a hint of nostalgia in her eyes. "Do you remember the first time we met?" she asked.

"Sure I do. I mean, half your body had been blown away, Camilla. That's not the kind of thing you forget," Ernesta replied with a high laugh.

Camilla had been accompanying her parents on a business excursion to a conflict zone when they were attacked by a group of anti-government insurgents. Camilla's parents had hired armed escorts, but they were badly outnumbered. Her parents lost their lives, and Camilla herself suffered life-threatening injuries. Her parents had been dealing with Frauenlob at the time, and she was transported to one of their labs.

Ernesta, already widely known as a peerless prodigy, happened to be researching Puppets in that very laboratory. While the technology for regenerating human body parts was widely available, the time it took to cultivate organs meant it had no application in emergencies. And so Ernesta applied her expertise to save Camilla's life.

Although she had not asked in so many words, Ernesta was sure it was because of this past that her friend was so insistent on developing weapons that anyone could use. Camilla's parents had tried to fight with the weapons their guards carried, but they weren't even able to activate them properly.

Moreover, Camilla's parents had been ordinary civilians. Even with the use of those weapons, they would have been no match for combat-trained insurgents. In the end, weapons depended entirely on their users. No matter how versatile the device, that would remain an inescapable truth.

That was why Camilla pursued Puppets as a solution.

More than anyone in the world, Camilla mistrusted human beings.

"Yes. Half my body is a Puppet that you made for me. And I swore to give you half of my life in return."

"Yup, and I took it." Ernesta nodded innocently.

"That's why…I won't criticize your dream. True, my objective isn't the same—but that's another conversation."

"Then why were you so mad?"

Camilla's eyes lit up at those words. "That was my anger as an engineer! How many times did I tell you? That thing is too dangerous to use in actual combat! And I was right to be afraid! Just look at the abnormal spikes in these readings!" Camilla jabbed at her mobile device, opening an air-window that displayed many graphs. "There's no way we can manage this much output! We were one step away from losing control!"

"Aw, c'mon. We didn't really have a choice. If we lose now, then all our work will be for nothing." Ernesta pouted like a child receiving a scolding.

"If you wanted results, we have more than enough—"

"Nope. I've been telling you from the start. My only goal is the championship. And then I'll have them make Ardy and Rimcy official students at our school." Unable to contain her excitement, Ernesta began twirling around. *Yes, and that'll be the first step to spreading awareness about autonomous Puppets. That's why I simply have to win the Phoenix.*

"But that's what I'm saying—," Camilla protested just as a call came to the mobile device in her hand. "It's me. Yes, it— What?"

The tone of her voice changed mid-reply.

As Ernesta wondered what the call could be about, Camilla gave her a troubled look.

"There's a call for you—from Dirk Eberwein."

"Huh… Well, what do you know. Okay, put him through."

"Right." Camilla touched her mobile, and a new air-window opened to show a slightly overweight young man.

"…Hey. So you're Ernesta Kühne?"

Ernesta laughed. "That's some way to greet someone you're meeting for the first time. Yup. I'm Ernesta Kühne, leader of the Pygmalion faction. Nice to meet you, Tyrant." Ernesta spoke in her usual tone and gave a small bow.

Dirk scoffed. *"You're even more obnoxious than they say."*

"And you're even less likable than they say," Ernesta replied. "So? What do you want? I thought you guys were all buddy-buddy with Magnum Opus?"

For a moment, an unsettling gleam showed in Dirk's eyes. *"You're better informed than I thought. But let me set you straight. We agreed with that crazy broad not to get in each other's way, and that's it. We're not friendly and we're not working together."*

"Hmm… I didn't know that. But I guess it makes sense, now that I think about it. No way would she forgive you after you stole Erenshkigal from her."

"Never mind that. I'll get straight to the point. Join forces with us."

"Ugh, *that*'s why you called? What a complete waste of time…!" Camilla glared at Dirk with open hatred, but the red-haired youth paid her no mind.

"Hmm, isn't that an awfully blunt way to propose a relationship?" Ernesta said. "I mean, first of all, we barely know anything about you guys. Shouldn't we explore this after we get to know each other better?"

"Why bother? I said 'join forces,' but all I want is your cooperation, whenever and however we need it. You'll be compensated accordingly."

"Compensated?"

Dirk sniffed disdainfully. *"We prepared a little gift as a gesture. You can make a decision after you see it."*

*

"Excuse me."

After a knock and a polite greeting, Claudia entered the prep room. "Miss Sasamiya, Miss Toudou, I know the outcome of your match disappoints you. But finishing in the top four is something you should be truly proud of. For Seidoukan Academy, the prospects for this Festa season are considerably brighter, thanks to you. I'll make sure the two of you are rewarded accordingly for

your achievement."

She gave them a gracious bow, to which Saya and Kirin responded somewhat bashfully.

"N-no, really, that's…!"

"…Don't bother. We fought for ourselves."

Ayato had heard that students who placed high in the Festa received significant rewards, although not as much as the winners. Sometimes it was simply money, or sometimes they would be granted privileges similar to the ones extended to Page One students. The latter sort of reward sounded appealing, considering that the privileges would not be revoked due to a drop in rank.

"By the way, Claudia," Julis asked, "did you happen to see Flora on the way here?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I didn't." Claudia shook her head slowly.

"We said we would meet here after the match…"

But considerable time had passed since the match ended. Ayato and Julis's match was not until evening, so they were in no hurry—but it worried them that Flora was so late.

"You can't reach her on her mobile device?" Claudia asked.

"We've been trying," Julis fretted.

Ayato stood up. "I'll go check our prep room again. Maybe Flora got the meeting place wrong."

"Right… I'll go ask reception if they've got any lost children."

As if on cue, her mobile device signaled an incoming call just before Julis could leave the room. Seeing who it was from, she smiled.

"It's Flora. What on earth could she be up to?" But then her smile faded, quickly replaced by a more serious expression. "A voice-only call…?"

Frowning suspiciously, she opened an air-window. The visual was pitch-black nothingness, and a deep, gloomy voice said, "Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld?"

"Who are you? Why do you have this phone?!" Julis shouted, fury and panic rising.

"*The owner of this mobile device is in our custody*," the voice replied dispassionately. *"Is Ayato Amagiri with you?"*

"Yeah, that's me— Is Flora safe?" Ayato was surprised to hear his name but responded immediately to the matter at hand.

Then, after a short silence—

"*Your Highness! Master Amagiri! I'm okay!*" an excited child

called to them.

There was no mistaking it. The voice was Flora's.

"If you agree to our demand, we will guarantee her safety."

"And what are you demanding?"

"Apply for an emergency freeze on the Ser Veresta. We'll free the girl once we confirm the request has been received."

"An emergency freeze…?"

"If we determine that our demand was not carried out, or if you contact the city guard or Seidoukan's covert ops apparatus, then we can't guarantee her safety. The same goes if you forfeit or withdraw from the Festa. That is all."

"Hey, wait—!"

The air-window closed after the voice had had its say. Ayato quickly snatched the mobile device from Julis's hand and called back. But of course, there was no answer. The caller had turned off the power, or perhaps destroyed the device to avoid being traced.

"Flora…kidnapped…?" Julis mumbled, her face pale. The strength was gone from her voice. She hardly seemed like herself.

It was Claudia who spoke next. "Stay calm, Julis. They're after Ayato, not you. We can't do anything if you panic. That would be exactly what they want."

"Claudia…"

"First, we have to get a firm grasp on the situation, and then we can decide what needs to be done."

Julis took a deep breath, exhaled, then slapped both of her cheeks with her hands. "Yes, you're right. Sorry."

A fierce anger still burned in her eyes, but she no longer seemed to be panicking. The exchange made Ayato remember what a dependable friend Claudia was.

"Claudia, what's this emergency freeze that they wanted?" he asked.

The kidnappers' demand was directed at him. He was prepared to follow it immediately if possible. Whatever it involved, there was no way it was worth more than Flora's life.

"An emergency freeze is requested when a wielder of a school-owned Orga Lux senses danger from the weapon." Turning to Ayato, Claudia slightly lowered her eyes. "As you already know, using an Orga Lux entails certain kinds of risks. If there is a real danger, in many cases, it would be recognizable only to the wielder. So an Orga Lux wielder can, at his or her discretion, apply to have

the weapon forcibly sealed away."

"So—the kidnappers want to make the Ser Veresta unusable?"

"It would seem so."

"B-but then," Kirin interjected timidly, "can't you just have the freeze lifted once Flora is freed? It doesn't have to be sealed forever, does it?"

With an expression that neither confirmed nor denied, Claudia shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, that's true, as far as the procedure itself is concerned. An emergency freeze is meant for just that—emergencies. After the Orga Lux is sealed away, a detailed inspection is carried out. If that reveals no danger, then the freeze on the Ser Veresta can be lifted immediately. However…"

"…if he did that, Ayato wouldn't be able to use the Ser Veresta ever again." Julis finished Claudia's sentence, looking repulsed by these tactics.

"Oh? But…"

As Kirin tilted her head in confusion, Ayato held out the Ser Veresta activator. "If I did something like that, it would never forgive me."

"Ah…" Finally understanding, Kirin lowered her head in frustration.

Right. It was impossible to imagine that this recalcitrant Orga Lux would take such treatment lying down. Ayato didn't know how aware the Ser Veresta was of its surroundings, but based on past experience, he had no hopes that it might graciously take their predicament into consideration. The sword would never let him touch it again, let alone draw on its powers.

But, still…

"Claudia, what specifically do I have to do to apply for the freeze?"

If that was all it took to save Flora, there was no reason to hesitate. Ayato felt guilty toward the weapon, but with a life on the line, the choice was perfectly clear.

"Are you sure, Ayato?" Claudia said, looking pained.

Of course, losing the Ser Veresta at this point in the Phoenix would deal a serious blow to their chances. As a friend, Claudia might not want to press the issue, but she also had her responsibilities as Seidoukan's student council president.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, Ayato…" Julis stared at the floor, frustration and

guilt plain on her face.

"It's okay, Julis. She's family to you, and that comes first," Ayato told her gently, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"But…even if you do it, we don't know that they'll actually release Flora," mumbled Saya, breaking her silence.

The thought must have crossed the minds of everyone in the room, though they'd refrained from saying it aloud.

"Still, if we don't agree to their demands, Flora will—"

"That's not what I'm suggesting. I'm only saying we have other options."

"Options…?"

"We rescue Flora. Problem solved."

"Wha…?" Julis began, falling speechless.

But on hearing the idea, Claudia began seriously considering it. "I see. That is a possibility."

"The kidnapper told us not to involve the city guard or the covert ops," Saya continued. "They didn't mention any other restrictions. Then that means finding and rescuing her on our own is okay."

"Do you expect these criminals to buy your twisted logic?" Julis demanded.

"No, it might not be as insane as you think. It doesn't matter whether the kidnappers would be persuaded by the logic; all we need is for them not to find out." Claudia paused, then turned to look over everyone in the room. "I have a proposal. Of course, it's up to you to decide whether you wish to go along with it…" Her gaze rested squarely on Julis.

"Fine. Let's hear it."

"In that case—first, I was never here. I know nothing of this. And I will disappear for a while. I will think of an excuse later, but I'll be incommunicado."

"Huh?"

As the group gave her a collective blank stare, Claudia went on, "Ayato, you will apply for the emergency freeze procedure. This request requires the approval of the student council president—which is to say, my approval. That buys us time until I return."

"I see. By applying, I will have agreed to their demands…"

The delay would be at the student council level, and the kidnappers could hardly place the blame with Ayato.

"In the meantime, you find out where the kidnappers are and

rescue Flora. But I can't miss the presentation of awards for the Festa. That means we can only stall until tomorrow's closing ceremony. The emergency freeze does not require any discussion to be implemented, so you should assume that the application will be accepted as soon as the closing ceremony is over."

The award and closing ceremonies were scheduled for after the championship. The championship would start at noon, so even if it was a drawn-out match…

"I would say you have roughly twenty-four hours," Claudia added.

"That's an impossible task," Julis said.

Asterisk was larger than it sometimes felt. To determine the location of the kidnapper in a mere twenty-four hours would be impossible without the help of the city guard.

"I don't think it is," Claudia said. "Searching all of Asterisk would be difficult, but in this case, we can narrow it down. I think you already have a good guess, Julis."

"The redevelopment area!" Julis looked at her with a gasp.

"H-how do you know?" Kirin asked.

"There's only one person who would do something this brazen. Plus, the real target is Ayato and the Ser Veresta. This means the mastermind is almost certainly Dirk Eberwein. For whatever reason, he's had Ayato and the Ser Veresta in his sights for a while now."

"The Tyrant…" Even Kirin had heard of him. "The Devious King."

"Of course, if he's directly involved, he'll make sure there's no evidence leading back to him. We shouldn't hope to find any. But if he's gone this far, he's likely to be working with Le Wolfe's intelligence—the Grimalkin. So, the place we'd most likely find Flora is in their territory, which is the redevelopment area. Besides, that's the only area where they could play rough and not draw attention to themselves." Claudia summed up their plan of action. "So, in short—while we pretend to have accepted their demands, we find the kidnappers and rescue Flora within twenty-four hours. That is my proposal. What do you think?"

"…"

Julis was silent for a while, but then she turned to her partner, placing the final decision in his hands. "What do you think, Ayato?"

"I think…it's not a bad plan. I can deal with giving up the Ser Veresta, but Saya is right that it wouldn't guarantee Flora's

freedom. We should try everything we can."

"I see…" Julis fell silent again, closing her eyes as if to calm herself—until she abruptly opened them again. "Very well. Let's do it."

The group nodded firmly in unison.

"But Ayato," Saya said, "you and Riessfeld should get ready for your semifinal match."

"I agree," Claudia added. "The kidnappers insisted that you not forfeit the Festa, so you should concentrate on the match."

"Easier said than done. How can I concentrate?" Agitation was written all over Julis's face. "If I had my way, I'd forget all about the Festa and go search for Flora right now."

"Oh? But wouldn't that mean giving up on your wish, Julis?" Claudia said.

"I don't care. If I have to sacrifice the very thing I'm trying to protect, there's no point." Julis stated decisively, but then she quickly turned to Ayato, guiltily lowering her eyes. "Um… I'm sorry. I said that thinking only of myself, but we're a team. I'll honor your decision, too."

"You don't need to worry about that, Julis. I feel the same way."

Ayato had just decided to pursue finding his sister, but there were other Festa tournaments. There was nothing to consider.

Seeing this exchange between Ayato and Julis, Claudia gave them a weak smile. "Really, you two—you'll need more ambition than that to make your wishes come true in this city. Especially you, Julis. You're too afraid of loss."

"What do you expect? I don't want to go through that ever again," Julis muttered in reply.

Claudia continued to speak like a mother lecturing a child. "You will save Flora, *and* you will win the Phoenix. That's the spirit you should have. I'm speaking not as your student council president, but as a friend."

"Claudia…" Julis stared back at her in surprise. Then she let out a sigh. "Fine. If that option exists, I have to take it. I couldn't bear to let some criminal's plan go off without a hitch."

With that, she slammed her fist into her palm. She seemed to be back to her usual self.

"But—why did the kidnappers insist on us not forfeiting the Festa?" Ayato voiced the question that popped into his head.

This seemed like an unnecessary condition, if Dirk Eberwein was simply aiming to put the Ser Veresta out of commission.

"I'm only speculating, but it must be to confirm that you carried out the demand," Claudia said. "If you don't use the Ser Veresta in a match, that would be proof that you agreed to the conditions. Whether or not the application for the emergency freeze is accepted would be up to Seidoukan's internal bureaucracy. It would take even Grimalkin some time to follow up on that."

"I see…"

"But this also gives us the leeway to trick them. Usually, the Orga Lux in question is collected by the Materiel Department at the time of the application. I'll arrange it so that you can hold on to the activator in secret—and then you can use the Ser Veresta as soon as Flora is safely rescued." Claudia entered some commands in her mobile device. "I just sent you the electronic application for the emergency freeze. And some data that you might find useful."

Ayato checked his mobile to find an assortment of documents in his inbox.

"I do apologize, but that's all I can do for you. Please refrain from contacting me until Flora is safe again."

"You've done more than enough to help. Er—thank you, Claudia." As Julis extended her words of gratitude, Claudia responded with a gentle smile.

"Well, let's get started. The clock is ticking."

"Right."

Saya and Kirin exchanged glances and stood.

"Oh, you may want to wear a simple disguise when entering the redevelopment area," Claudia added, suddenly remembering. "I'm told Grimalkin is a small organization, so I doubt they'll have a large team for surveillance. But you can never be too careful. If you're not immediately recognizable, it should be all right. A hat or something would be enough, I'd think."

"Got it," Saya replied.

As the two girls turned to leave the prep room, this time, Julis hesitated briefly and then called out. "Wait. I'm glad for your help. But you—"

"Julis." Saya cut her off, using her first name. "It's only natural to help a friend in need. Don't worry about it."

"I feel the same way," Kirin said.

Julis's eyes widened, but then she gave an awkward smile and a

firm nod. “Yes—of course. Saya, Kirin—we’re counting on you.”

They had to be ready to collapse after such an exhausting battle. Even so, Saya answered with a clear smile. “…Mm-hmm. We’ve got this.”

CHAPTER 3
THE SEMIFINALS: MATCH TWO

"…Nngh…ah…"

Flora woke with a groan, and the first thing she saw was her own shadow under the lamplight.

Dazed, she looked up to see several dim lights hanging from the ceiling. She was indoors, in a large room. The floor and walls were damaged to reveal the layers underneath, but the building itself didn't appear very old.

"Don't make a fuss."

The voice was dark and cold, as if echoing up from the depths of the earth. Fear took hold of Flora like a block of ice on her back.

It was an inorganic, chilly voice. She'd never heard anything like it before. As she reflexively shrank from it, she realized for the first time that her hands and feet were bound. Her mouth was gagged, and she was seated with her back against the wall.

She raised her head to see a tall man standing not far from her, in the shadow of a pillar.

Tight, pitch-black cloth covered his entire body, including his head—all except for the eyes. At first glance, he seemed emaciated and unarmed, but he held himself with an eerie stillness that revealed nothing at all.

"Sit still and be quiet," he said simply. But he didn't need to say more; the intimidating quality of his words brooked no argument.

Unable to do anything else, Flora quickly set to diagnosing her situation.

Hmm, I was watching the semifinal of the Phoenix tournament when someone called to me…

Her memory ended there, but she thought the man in black before her had the same voice. Did that mean he'd flagrantly kidnapped her from that crowded place?

The crime seemed too bold to succeed, but, upon reflection, Flora had to wonder how many people in that overexcited atmosphere would pay any mind to those around them.

In any case, I've been kidnapped—that's obvious.

Because of her upbringing, Flora was used to dealing with situations that skirted the law, as well as those who made their living outside it. But this was the first time she'd been kidnapped. And yet she found herself calm, probably thanks to her fearless character.

There would be no ransom to be had by kidnapping a child from a poor orphanage. So this couldn't be about money.

It was possible that he was after Flora herself—but that also seemed unlikely, judging by his indifference so far.

She couldn't have been chosen randomly. Flora was a child, but she was also a Genestella. If the kidnapper needed just any child, he hardly needed to choose such a high-risk target.

Then does this have something to do with Her Highness…?

If Flora herself was not the objective, then the other possibility was her connections. He had kidnapped her to demand something of Julis—that seemed the most plausible explanation.

Once she had reached this conclusion, she stole a glance at the man. If she was right, then she couldn't very well just sit there. She hadn't come all this way to be a burden on Julis.

Maybe I could escape when he isn't paying attention, or at least contact Her Highness somehow…

Flora tried to move without letting him notice, and— "Hmmf?!"

She felt her head being grabbed from behind and powerfully shoved against the floor. At the same time, a cold, sharp *something* pressed into her neck.

"I thought I told you to sit still."

But the man had not taken a single step from his place in the shade of the pillar. An accomplice…?

That couldn't be. Flora had been sitting up with her back *directly against the wall.*

It was then that she noticed the pulse of mana.

He's a Dante…!

"That was your last warning." As he spoke, the *thing* that had

been pressing Flora down vanished.

Lying on the floor, Flora sighed in relief.

She hated to admit it, but this was not an opponent she could outsmart. Apparently, she had no choice but to do as he said.

For now, at least.

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"And finally, the moment you've been waiting for! There are only two matches left in this Phoenix tournament—the upcoming second semifinal, and tomorrow's championship! Who will emerge victorious from this match to compete against Allekant? Will it be Seidoukan, or Gallardworth?!"

As Yanase's exhilarated announcer voice washed over them, Julis strode to the center of the stage, looking disheartened. "Finally, it's time for our match."

"That felt like forever…"

After Saya and Kirin had left, Ayato and Julis had simply waited in their prep room. But, admittedly, it felt less like waiting and more like slow torture from worry and restlessness.

"I thought I was more or less used to feeling weak and helpless… But this time, it's different." Julis laughed hollowly.

"Well, let's trust Saya and Kirin to take care of it and focus on our match," offered Ayato.

"Right. I know." Julis shook her head as if to shake off her apprehension, then turned her eyes on the pair who had emerged from the opposite gate.

They were two young men in St. Gallardworth uniforms—though actually, one was still a boy. He seemed to be the same age as Kirin, perhaps a bit older, with fluffy blond hair and lingering childish innocence in his charming face.

Elliot Forster, Gallardworth's twelfth-ranked fighter, was a young prodigy known by the alias Claíomh Solais, the Shining Sword. Because dueling was strictly regulated in Gallardworth, people said it was harder to climb in rank there compared to other schools. It was highly unusual for a middle school student to become a Page One in that environment.

Standing beside him was a broad-shouldered youth with a shaved head—Doroteo Lemus, alias Brightwen, the Armored Mage.

He was ranked eleventh. In stark contrast to Elliot, he had the look of a battle-hardened veteran, and he was more than twenty years old. This was his third Festa tournament.

Ayato had skimmed their data, but now that he faced them in person, he could sense their strength. These were formidable opponents.

"I'd like to finish up the match quickly and go look for Flora, but against two knights of Gallardworth, that's easier said than done. We won't beat them if our minds are elsewhere." Julis glanced at Ayato and shifted her shoulders. "And on top of that, you can't use the Ser Veresta."

"Well, I'll deal somehow," Ayato muttered as he activated a sword.

"Your optimism's encouraging, at least," Julis said drily. "You take Elliot Forster, then. I'll handle Doroteo Lemus."

"Got it," he nodded.

She faced their opponents again. "If the ones who kidnapped Flora are watching…they'll see. We'll show them our real strength."

"Phoenix Semifinal, Match Two— Begin!"

As the school crest system declared the start of the match, Ayato immediately released his seal.

Before, he'd used the *image* of breaking free from binding chains—but no longer. All he had to do now was mentally insert a key into the lock that held the chains. And then he would overflow with power.

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*" The mana around Julis condensed at once, creating a maelstrom of heat.

The giant fireball roared from her hand toward Doroteo…and landed a direct hit. A searing, six-petaled flower blossomed into a fiery explosion.

But—

"Ha-ha! That's some greeting, Glühen Rose."

The dark silhouette of a man slowly rose from the center of the fire flower, his voice muffled.

Waving aside the flames, a knight clad in European-style plate mail appeared.

Of course it was no ordinary armor. Conventional materials could hardly defend against Julis's flames.

“And that’s an impressive costume change,” Julis remarked. “So, your alias isn’t just for show, Armored Mage.”

She activated and readied her Aspera Spina. Evidently, she had expected this turn of events.

The Armored Mage. As the alias suggested, Doroteo’s ability allowed him to create a highly durable armor that covered his whole body and deflected attacks. Still, in terms of defensive strength, it was not nearly as impenetrable as Ardy’s barrier, and it had been destroyed in the past with Meteor Arts attacks.

But what made this armor particularly troublesome was that it was the product of a special ability, so it could be fully repaired in an instant even after being totaled. And since Doroteo’s school crest was attached to his uniform, an attack had to penetrate the armor to destroy it. (According to the Stella Carta, as long as the crest was in the required position at the start of the match, it was permissible to defend it with special abilities.)

And there was one more thing…

“Now it’s my turn, I suppose.” Doroteo stretched out his left hand, and countless tiny, thin plates materialized and started combining.

They joined together in layers upon layers until there stood an enormous armored war horse—or rather, armor in the shape of a horse. As it shook itself out like a living thing, Doroteo leaped on its back with a practiced air. Once seated, he activated a Lux to summon an immense lance.

He was the very image of a knight from a medieval tale.

“Oh? You’re going all out from the start,” Julis chided.

“Against the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, that’s only natural.” Lance in hand, Doroteo gave a light kick to the horse’s side, and it began galloping toward her at breakneck speed. It moved exactly like a live horse—though it was much faster.

“En garde, Glühen Rose!” Hefting his lance, Doroteo ferociously charged forward as one with his steed.

“Julis—!” As Ayato called out, the sharp aura of a nearby sword stroke jolted his side.

“Am I not your opponent?”

Ayato reflexively moved to distance himself while Elliot stood in a sideways stance, as was the style at Gallardworth. He wielded his claymore Lux in one hand.

“Ayato Amagiri. I’ve been looking forward to fighting you. I

wish you wouldn't make me wait." Elliot's voice was serene, but the aggression rolling off him was enough to make Ayato ready his own sword.

"…Sorry about that," Ayato replied.

"And where is your Ser Veresta? Don't tell me you're holding back."

"Unfortunately, there's a reason I can't use it at the moment. It's not that I'm underestimating you. I hope you don't get the wrong idea."

"Hmm. You have a reason, eh? So be it." Elliot seemed somewhat dissatisfied but composed himself quickly; his eyes still glittered with a fierce light. "Our student council president spoke highly of your sword technique. I can't wait to see it!"

In the next instant, Elliot thrust his weapon at Ayato's eyes.

"Gah…!"

He was fast. The speed of the blade could rival Kirin's. But unlike hers, the blow wasn't very heavy.

"—?!"

Ayato barely deflected his opponent's sword, then switched places with him as he readied his own strike—only to realize what was coming just before he swung. He leaped back as Elliot's blade grazed his side.

If his reaction had been an instant later, Elliot would have carved out his torso. It was a perfectly timed counterattack.

"Oh? You dodged it—I wasn't expecting that," Elliot muttered aloud, perplexed. "I hadn't used that move yet in this tournament."

Indeed, there was nothing in Elliot's data that had suggested he would use a counter like that one.

Ayato's impression of Elliot was that he was a nimble fighter with a solid grasp of the fundamentals, yet also able to mete out fluid and varied attacks without falling into patterns—in other words, a versatile prodigy of the sword.

It seemed his impression would have to be revised.

"I see… So you're good at reacting to your opponent. I wasn't expecting a counterattack from that position," Ayato admitted. In the end, the first attack had been a feint.

"Well, you're right about that," Elliot said, pouting as he readied his weapon anew. "But I have more than counterattacks!"

He closed the distance to Ayato, sweeping his sword low enough to let its tip run across the ground—then flicking it upward.

As Ayato put up his guard, Elliot's sword traced a curve to dodge Ayato's blade.

"Whoa—!"

The Gallardworth style of one-handed swordplay stood out for its arcing slices with turns of the wrist and long thrusts. It was practically the opposite of the Amagiri Shinmei style, in which the user-powered heavy, sharp attacks were generated with their whole body. What the Gallardworth style lacked in force, it made up for with agility.

Ayato deflected the fierce succession of attacks, but each time he considered attacking, he was greeted by a swift counter. It was all he could do to keep up.

"Guess you weren't kidding…!"

The Luxes clashed over and over with clangs and characteristic bursts of sparks.

His attack sequence, the way he controlled the distance to his opponent, his quick judgments, and obviously, his sword technique —there was no doubting Elliot's talent in every respect. The timing of his counterattacks in particular was phenomenal.

Indeed, in terms of talent alone, he might just rival Kirin.

"But your sword…is still too light."

Here, Ayato spoke not of Elliot's sword itself, nor his physical strength, but the resolve behind it.

He forced his way close to his opponent and deflected the youth's sword, then made a thrust at his school crest.

"Hah! Not so fast!"

As if he'd been waiting for it, the boy twisted to reposition himself and then stabbed forward, mirroring Ayato. At the same time, he turned his wrist to trap Ayato's sword, but…

"What—?!"

The elder youth had pulled his arm back before Elliot's attack. Ayato whipped the tip upward to deflect the other sword.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Twin Demon Hornets*."

As if threading a needle through the brief hole in Elliot's guard, Ayato's sword gleamed with a second thrust.

"Elliot Forster—badge broken."

As Elliot's school crest shattered, his eyes widened in disbelief.

“It—it can’t be—”

As the youth crumpled to the ground, Ayato discreetly gave him a sad smile.

In another few years, this boy would likely become a fearsome swordsman. Although that would depend on how much of himself he devoted to it, in the end.

“So…” Letting out a small sigh, Ayato looked toward Julis.

Just then, her fight was also coming to a close.

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“En garde, Glühen Rose!”

“Gnh…!”

As Doroteo’s horse charged, Julis just barely dodged it with a diving roll.

The lance was so sharp that it looked capable of cutting the wind itself. A direct hit would end the match then and there.

It’s so much faster than I imagined! And so powerful—!

Julis stood up immediately and readied the Aspera Spina again.

Her foe was known for charging with this lance, and Julis had seen many videos of his matches. Still…

“It’s much more daunting to face it in person…,” she murmured. The attack itself was simple enough. But that also made it harder to deal with. “I suppose the only way is to overwhelm force with force.”

Doroteo, after galloping past her, had wheeled his horse to face her again. Julis let out a startled cry at the fluid movements of the steed.

The abilities of Dantes and Stregas were based on mental pictures. Everything depended on the *image*. There was no logical reason to create a horse—it took a lot of trouble, and there were simpler ways to charge the enemy. But the quality of the ability changed drastically based on how refined an *image* the user could conjure. The horse must have been, quite simply, the thing most suited to Doroteo.

“Yaaaaargh!” With a ferocious battle cry, the Gallardworth student charged again.

“Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*” Julis activated her powers in an instant and slammed all nine fireballs into the incoming knight.

Even though they were direct hits, he didn't slow in the slightest and continued undeterred. Small breaks appeared in his armor where the attacks had landed, but those were immediately repaired.

"Haah!"

"—!"

As Doroteo shouted, Julis dodged. His lance passed an inch from her face, and a few strands of her rose-pink hair drifted away.

That strike was much closer than the last. He was reading her movements and adjusting accordingly.

At this rate, it won't be long until I'm skewered. Julis smiled wryly at the idea, even as she shuddered.

Not that she would wait for that to happen, however.

"Blossom—*Loropetalum!*"

With a swing of the Aspera Spina, Julis activated the trap she had been gradually setting.

She had used this wall of fire before, against the Jie Long twins. But this time, instead of a single long wall, several barricades erupted in layers.

The nature of a charge on horseback required a running start to be fully effective. Maneuvering around obstacles like these would unavoidably sacrifice speed and power.

…Or so Julis had thought, until Doroteo defied her expectations.

"Yaaaaaargh!"

"Impossible!" she blurted.

With another ferocious battle cry, he charged through the fiery walls head-on.

The horse leaped high and broke through the nearest wall, appearing before her with Doroteo and his lance atop its back.

"Burst into bloom—*Anthurium!*"

Julis summoned a shield of fire, but it was rushed; she couldn't completely focus her prana, so the mana formed a lackluster spell. She was just barely able to create the shield—which Doroteo's lance shattered with ease.

"Ngh!" The mana scattered, and the shock launched her backward.

Thankfully, it was enough to avoid being impaled. But as she got to her feet again, Doroteo was readying himself for a fourth charge.

He meant to end it this time. She could feel the tension in the air on the stage.

"Fine, bring it on. Burst into bloom—*Longiflorum!*"

Julis canceled her fiery walls and created a lance of flame.

"Rraaaaaaaaaaagh!" With an even louder battle cry than before, the knight charged.

Julis hurled her lance past his, but still he did not stop.

As he took a direct hit to his chest, he struck with all his might —

"…!"

But it missed her, only grazing the edge of her clothes.

"Phew…my lance got to you first," Julis said with a relieved sigh and a smile, turning around. After galloping past her, the man had fallen from his horse.

"W-wow, what happened there?! Lemus has collapsed! But it didn't look like Riessfeld's attacks were having any effect on him…"

Listening to the perplexed announcer, Julis walked toward her opponent. He could no longer maintain his ability, and his armor and horse dissolved then and there.

"You really are reckless," she told him.

Gasping on his back, Doroteo managed to summon a bitter smile to his flushed face. "I wanted to try to end it quickly. I wouldn't have had a chance if our fight had dragged on."

Indeed, no matter how much his armor shielded him from damage, he could not defend against the heat of Julis's flames. After withstanding that much fire, the temperature inside his armor must have grown unbearable. Not even a Genestella could last long under those circumstances.

This had been Julis's goal all along. Doroteo knew it, too, and he had tried to make the match quick.

"Even so, charging through those walls of fire was too much. You could have lasted longer if not for that."

"I took a gamble, and I lost. Nothing more," Doroteo said with a face that betrayed no regrets, then pointed to his own chest. "Now, make it quick."

Julis nodded and pierced his school crest with the Aspera Spina.

"Doroteo Lemus, badge broken."

Some abilities matched well against others, and in this

particular instance, Julis had the upper hand. Even so, a win was still a win.

Letting out a tiny sigh, Julis shifted her gaze to Ayato.

And at that moment, his fight was also coming to a close.

"Winners: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

The automated voice rang through the stadium and was quickly drowned out by the wild cheers of the crowd.

Ayato and Julis exchanged small smiles, but as they exited the stage, their expressions turned somber once again.

CHAPTER 4
RACING THE CLOCK

The redevelopment area was once the site of the Jade Twilight Incident, an event without parallel in the history of Asterisk. At the time, the entire area was sealed off, and the situation was resolved thanks to the brave actions of Helga Lindwall, the leader of the Stjarnagarm. Still, the incident resulted in tremendous casualties—as the city dealt with the aftermath and questions of blame and accountability, allocation of the recovery budget was met with endless delays. Meanwhile, student delinquents—mostly from the Le Wolfe Black Institute—occupied it as their base of operations. As they engaged in occasional skirmishes with the city guard, the place became a gathering place for dropouts as well as criminals from outside the city. Now it was a full-fledged gangland.

Still, not all of the redevelopment area was a hotbed of violent crime. The Rotlicht, located on the outskirts, was relatively safe. As long as one avoided the slums, there was little immediate danger.

There were dilapidated buildings here and there throughout the district, deserted due to the risk of collapse. Claudia surmised that Flora's kidnappers were using one as a hideout.

"They're not in this one, either," Kirin murmured with a stern expression, examining the map displayed in her air-window.

Several red points blinked on the map, indicating areas of interest. Claudia had previously made a list of all such buildings, and, once she'd repurposed the information for their present mission, had given them the data.

The map did help, but there were too many locations for two people to cover. Only Le Wolfe had a thoroughly detailed

knowledge of this area, and the list they had was incomplete. And what was more, Saya and Kirin couldn't split up, since Saya completely lacked any sense of direction.

But searching together was probably unavoidable anyway—if Flora's kidnapper really was a special agent working for Le Wolfe, it would be too dangerous to face him alone.

"…We'll just have to go through them one by one." Saya walked beside Kirin. Her voice was slightly agitated, though her expression was as calm as ever.

"You're right," Kirin agreed. "Next, there's— Ouch!"

Pain shot through her right leg. It was the injury she'd suffered in her fight against Ardy.

"…Don't overwork yourself."

"N-no…! I can handle this!" Kirin was hunched over in pain, but she forced a smile and immediately stood up again.

Not only was she injured, Kirin was so exhausted from the fight that she couldn't move the way she wanted, and she was short on prana, too—if they did run into something, it would be best for her to avoid combat if at all possible. Although Saya didn't show it, she had to be feeling similarly.

But a pair of young women walking in the redevelopment area attracted a certain kind of men. The ones they had encountered so far had not been too persistent, but it was only six in the evening. There was no telling what might happen as the night wore on.

Those men would be less likely to harass them if they knew that this pair were none other than Seidoukan's Saya Sasamiya and Kirin Toudou, semifinalists in the current Phoenix. But per Claudia's instructions, they hid their heads under their hats and wore the most nondescript clothing possible. They wouldn't be recognized unless someone studied them up close.

And then, a call reached Saya's mobile. "Hmm… It's Ayato."

"Saya, Kirin, what's going on?"

"…Sorry. No leads yet."

"Oh… Okay. Just don't push yourselves too hard. Your leg is in pretty bad shape, Kirin." It was almost as if Ayato had been watching their earlier interaction.

"D-don't worry about me—I'm fine!" Kirin replied. But even though this wasn't really the time for such consideration, she was still glad to receive it from him.

"By the way," Saya said, "since you're calling, it must be over

already?"

"Yeah. We made it to the final, thank goodness."

Saya and Kirin exchanged glances and smiled.

"*We'll get ready and join you over there as soon as we can*," he added. *"Can you send us the data?"*

"Sure." Saya sent him the map with the cleared buildings marked.

"You shouldn't push yourselves too hard, either," Kirin said. "You have the championship tomorrow."

"We'll be fine." Ayato laughed. *"Talk to you soon."*

With that, he hung up.

Ayato and Julis joining them would help their effort, but it still wouldn't be easy to find Flora within the allotted time. The remaining list of locations to investigate was immense.

"…Let's go, Kirin." Saya started walking again.

"Right." She nodded firmly and continued beside her classmate.

There was no use agonizing over it. As Saya had pointed out, all they could do now was check the target locations one by one.

"Anyway, I'm glad they advanced."

"I knew Ayato could do it." Saya's pride was clear in her reply.

"The next one is the championship…"

"Even for him, it'll be hard to beat them without the Ser Veresta."

"…Yes, I think you're right."

The two knew the strength of Ayato and Julis's final opponents better than anyone. And considering how quickly the Puppets were learning, they would be much stronger in the championship than they had been in that day's match.

"…"

Abruptly, Saya paused.

"Saya…?" Kirin turned to find her standing still, gaze fixed on the ground.

"Kirin…" Saya said her teammate's name in a tiny, trembling voice. "I really wanted to win."

Kirin's heart filled with the frustration she had kept at bay.

"Me too," Saya managed to answer, her voice quavering the same way.

The two stood without a word for several moments.

Finally, Saya scrubbed away her tears and raised her head. "Let's go. There's still something we can do."

She broke into a run. Kirin nodded, still biting her lip, and followed.

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"Nothing to report yet."

"Yes, I could hear," Julis replied to Ayato bluntly, leaning against the prep room wall.

Ayato had called Saya as soon as they returned to the prep room after the semifinal match. But the two girls had yet to find anything resembling a clue.

Ayato and Julis were skipping the winners' interview again. They didn't have the time, and someone would be sure to ask about the Ser Veresta. That was a line of questioning he couldn't afford to answer badly—and he couldn't think of a good reply.

"Well, they must be doing their best. We should go join them." Julis seemed unable to stand still.

"Right…"

Ayato checked the time.

The final tomorrow was scheduled for noon, which meant that they had just eighteen hours left. Since the kidnappers had demanded they not forfeit the match, Ayato and Julis had to be back by then.

No—considering all the checks and procedures before the match, they had to be at the arena several hours before it. That meant they had even less time than that.

Just then, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Hey, congrats on advancing to the final… Wait." Eishirou came in and looked back and forth between Ayato and Julis, detecting something odd. "What's going on? You guys look pretty down in the dumps for winning the semifinal."

"Um…something's come up." Ayato was evading the question, but that response was the only hint Eishirou needed.

"Huh. Well, I don't want to pry or anything, but let me know if there's anything I can do to help. Okay?"

Ayato and Julis exchanged looks. They weren't sure about getting more people involved, but at the same time, they needed all the help they could get.

After a moment's hesitation, Julis gave a small nod.

"Yabuki," Ayato said, "before we tell you, I just want to get one thing straight…"

"Nah, I know. I won't write anything without your permission." Eishirou waved his hand to reassure them. "So? What happened?"

"Well…"

As Ayato gave a brief explanation, Eishirou sank into thought. Ayato had never seen him so serious.

"I see—I think our prez is right that Dirk Eberwein is behind this."

"Do you know much about Grimalkin, Yabuki?"

Eishirou slowly shook his head. "Nope. Among all the schools' intelligence agencies, they're a cut above when it comes to secrecy. Jie Long has its Nine Children of the Dragon, for instance, and they're known for taking extreme measures. And Queenvale's Benetnasch is said to have a team of experts in intelligence manipulation. But having a reputation also means people know about them, right? About Grimalkin, there's nothing."

If Eishirou with his wealth of information could say that, this Grimalkin had to be very secretive indeed.

"So, that's why I'd rather not mess with them if I can help it, but…given your situation, it sounds like there's no way around it. I know a bit about the redevelopment area, so I can help you look for the girl."

"That's more than enough," Ayato said.

"Right. If you can just find out where she is, leave the rough stuff to us. Actually, I'd appreciate it if you did," Julis said with a dark smile.

Seeing her fervor, Ayato was afraid she might actually turn the kidnapper into a pile of ash.

"I'd like to thank you for that, but speaking as a delicate, ordinary student, I'm going to need more assurances," Eishirou mumbled as he took out his mobile to look something up. "Let's see, where's that number— Huh? That's weird; I thought I put it in here…"

"I don't know what you're up to, but we're short on time," Julis prodded. "If this is going to take a while, we'll have to head out."

"All righty. I'll do what I can, but don't get your hopes up."

As Ayato watched the exchange, he had an idea. "I know. Julis, there's a different tack I want to try."

"A different tack?" Julis frowned dubiously. But then she seemed to pick up on what he was thinking and put her hand on her hip, unconvinced. "Well, try it—but I doubt she'll have anything for you."

"I know it's a long shot, but maybe information from her could give us some clues. It's worth asking." Ayato, too, pulled out his mobile.

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The specified meeting place turned out to be a cheerless diner on the outskirts of the commercial area.

Ayato took a seat in the back by the wall, as he'd been instructed to do. The voice that greeted him was quietly resonant—deep for a woman's. "There you are. Don't turn around."

Doing as Irene Urzaiz said, Ayato thanked her with his back to her. "Okay. But you didn't have to come meet me."

"What are you, stupid? I can't talk about this over a mobile. Think about my situation for a second." She sounded stunned by his ignorance.

"S-sorry."

"Whatever. I'll get to the point. Ain't a single thing I can tell you."

"…I see." Ayato was disappointed, but he hadn't expected anything different.

Since Irene knew about the inner workings of Le Wolfe, it had occurred to him that she might have something. But she was still

under Dirk's control. Ayato understood that she was in no position to help them freely.

"Don't get me wrong," she went on. "It's not like Dirk told me not to talk. It's the opposite, actually."

"The opposite…?"

"Dirk is definitely behind this. And you're probably right that Grimalkin is involved, too. But it didn't take you long to figure that out, did it? So it's obvious that you'd come to me. I'm your only connection to Le Wolfe. Me cooperating is a different question, but that's what you'd do."

Irene was entirely correct, so Ayato only nodded.

"You think the Tyrant, our Devious King, wouldn't have worked out that much?"

"Oh…" Now that she mentioned it, he understood.

There was no way that a man so adept in schemes and machinations would not have considered something so simple.

"And he hasn't said a damn word to me. So he knows that I don't have enough information to help." A hint of anger came into her voice. "I told you before, I'm just a trained dog that Dirk keeps around. Grimalkin is totally separate. I have information on a few of the Cats, but even that's not super-reliable."

"…"

There was something firmly convincing about Irene's words. He suspected that she knew what Dirk was capable of, having dealt with him closely.

Then the only thing they could do was to search on foot. He told himself that confirming that was worth the trouble.

"Okay," he said finally. "Thanks. That helped."

"…Amagiri, wait." Irene stopped him as he began getting up. "I don't have information. But I can share some speculation."

"Speculation?"

"Pure speculation. As in, just a guess. No guarantees. Still wanna hear it?"

"Of course." Right now, he would take any clue at all.

"You said you were narrowing your search to the abandoned buildings in the redevelopment area."

"Yeah, that's right. We're focusing on the places Claudia listed for us. What about it?"

"Normally, I'd say that's the right way to go. I've used that kind of place for some jobs, and I've heard of the Cats using them as a

base. But…I'm not sure they'd do that for a kidnapping."

"What do you mean?"

Irene let out a long sigh, then continued. "Even when they set up shop in a neglected area, they bail after a bit. Those places aren't for long-term use."

"Oh, because they could collapse?"

It stood to reason that staying in a run-down structure in danger of collapsing at any moment would not be ideal.

"If they were worried about that, they'd just reinforce the building. The biggest reason is the city guard," Irene said, scoffing behind him. "I mean, the cops aren't total idiots. They know criminals base their operations there, so they patrol them from time to time. Even if they don't do a thorough search at every one, some cops have abilities for sniffing you out. Abandoned buildings ain't the best place for a job that involves lying low for a long period of time. Y'know, like a kidnapping."

Ayato had heard that Dantes and Stregas with powers of detection were highly sought after, due to their value to police and military units.

"There are ways to fool those investigation abilities, but it takes some effort," she explained. "Cats typically work alone, so I'm not sure they'd go through all that."

"So you don't think the kidnapper is in a tenement."

"I'm just saying there are other possibilities." Irene chose her words carefully.

"Suppose you're right. Where would they be?"

"Beats me. But I'd say that the worst place for you guys would be the Rotlicht."

The Rotlicht.

The district on the outer edge of the redevelopment area was said to be a very lively spot. Ayato knew its reputation but had never stepped foot in it.

"You can search squats all you want, but the Rot is crammed with businesses, and not all of 'em are legal. You can't just barge into those places and look around, you know?"

"Yeah, that's true—but that would mean that there are people helping them hide out. You just said that the Cats usually work alone…"

"Sure. The one thing they can't do is to be linked to our school. They wouldn't be using the Le Wolfe name or anything that could

be traced back to Dirk. But down there, anything goes if you can pay for it. Or, y'know, if you have a big enough gun."

"Right…"

"Still…it'd probably be safer for them to use a tenement that works. It's just speculation."

Even so, what Irene said made sense.

They were short on manpower, but Ayato wondered whether they should include the Rotlicht in their search.

"Thanks. We'll take it into consideration." This time, Ayato did stand up to leave.

"Well, good luck. And one more thing…" As Ayato was walking past, Irene slid something onto the table. "That's from Priscilla."

Ayato took the small pail and left the shop.

After walking for a while, he peeked inside to find an assortment of snacks, with cheese and ham and vegetables.

"This is a big help…" He appreciated the gift, since it was unlikely they'd have the time for a proper meal until tomorrow. He would have to thank Priscilla later.

"First, I have to talk with Julis…"

If they had to include the Rotlicht as a possibility, they would also have to rethink how to allot their resources.

Ayato took out his mobile device and called Julis's number.

*

"By the way, master…"

In Ernesta's laboratory, underground in the research complex of Allekant Académie, Ardy lay amid a busy swarm of machinery. He addressed her gravely. "There is one thing I would most humbly ask of you— May I?"

"*Huhn?* You have a request, Ardy? That's unusual." From the other side of a fortified glass window, Ernesta replied, typing steadily away on several optical keyboards. "I have my hands full with Rimcy right now, so hold on a sec."

Rimcy lay next to her brother, and at the moment, Ernesta was busy with her repairs. Compared to Ardy, the girl was badly damaged. Her left arm was all but destroyed and would have to be entirely replaced.

Camilla was in charge of the Ruinsharif, so Ernesta had left that

part to her. She was probably busy in her own laboratory, fine-tuning replacement parts.

Ardy had not escaped with mere scrapes, either. At first, Ernesta had thought the wounds were only to his exterior armor, but on closer inspection, they ran much deeper.

The armor for the two Puppets was a new specially created alloy, the cutting edge of meteoric engineering, developed by the Sonnet faction. An ordinary katana shouldn't have been able to even scratch it. Kirin Toudou's skills were truly fearsome.

"We have to repair you both before the final tomorrow," Ernesta explained. "Sheesh. This might be an all-nighter, even for me…"

"Ah, but my request won't take any of your time, master. The cut on my face from the katana—I'd like you to leave it as it is, if possible."

At that, Ernesta's hands paused. "Well, it should be fine, if I do the necessary repairs on the inside…"

The cut on his head had damaged several sensors, but repairing those would be a relatively simple matter of replacing some parts.

"But I'm gonna do some internal reinforcement, okay?" she went on.

"Yes, that will do." Ardy nodded with satisfaction.

"So, why do you wanna leave a scar on purpose?"

"Why, to mark today's battle, of course."

"Hmm, like a victory trophy?"

"Er, nothing so grandiose…" After thinking for a while, Ardy continued slowly. "Through this fight, I was able to learn many things. After being faced with my own imperfections, I looked beyond to find not a simple accumulation of data, but what humans call—yes, growth! I grew, I'm certain of it! I would like to let the evidence of it remain!"

"…That's wonderful," Ernesta found herself saying.

Because he was imperfect, Ardy sought perfection. But in this world, there was no such thing. That meant that he would never stop evolving.

Ardy and Rimcy were only prototypes, but already they were approaching the ideal form of autonomous Puppets that Ernesta imagined.

"Master, I also have a request, if I may." Rimcy, who had been lying there without a word until now, spoke up in a calm voice.

“Oh, you too, Rimcy? Sure, just tell me what you want. Mommy’s in a good mood right now, so ask away!”

“Then I will state my insolent request. While I have no objections to parting with my equipment when transferring my limit control to Ardy…”

“Mm-hmm? Aaand?”

“I would appreciate it greatly if you could reduce the amount of exterior armor that is removed, or perhaps make the necessary adjustments for certain parts. I…find this embarrassing.”

Rimcy’s expression was as cold as usual, and her tone was clinical. But, upon closer inspection, Ernesta saw that her face was tinged ever so slightly pink.

After transferring all her exterior armor to Ardy, Rimcy was what humans would consider completely naked. There were technical hurdles to her request, however, and Ernesta would not be able to fulfill it immediately. “Umm, I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.” Understanding this, Rimcy nodded in resignation.

Unlike Ardy, Rimcy was created with a more humanlike appearance in mind. She should have been more human in displaying her emotions, too, but Ardy’s expressions were richer in that respect.

I wonder if it’s because of that…, Ernesta thought. Still, she told herself, a request like this should have been seen as a welcome sign of growth. “I guess this is all thanks to Saya Sasamiya and Kirin Toudou.”

Apparently it was true that facing strong opponents encouraged progress. She hoped the upcoming championship match would bear the same fruit…

“But who knows what’ll happen?”

Recalling the Devious King’s surly face, Ernesta let out a heavy sigh.

CHAPTER 5
A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

The Rotlicht made up only a small portion of the entire redevelopment area, one-fifth at most. But Main Street overflowed with people. Even accounting for the fact that a Festa event was underway, the hustle and bustle here rivaled that of the prime real estate in the commercial area.

The atmosphere and the visuals, however, could not be any more different.

Between the rows of shops, there were passageways on every floor, and the sky was obscured with layers upon layers of aerial corridors. Pillars supporting the corridors were haphazardly placed, without any sign of order—and this was the only place in Asterisk where such disorder went unchecked.

There was a diverse range of businesses, from ordinary liquor-serving establishments like clubs and bars to illegal ones such as underground casinos and brothels. The clientele also seemed to be on the older side. School-aged patrons were not completely scarce, but almost none wore their school crests. Since students were not allowed to remove their crests when leaving campus, if these patrons were in fact students, then that would be a violation of the Stella Carta, albeit a minor one.

The city guard patrolled the Rotlicht, but not to enforce minor infractions. The guard was perpetually shorthanded; they simply didn't have the time. The same went for the illegal businesses. While there were periodic checks, all but the most unscrupulous of these establishments were allowed to continue operating. This was one of the darker sides of Asterisk, in part made possible by certain

ties between the Rotlicht and the City Council.

"This isn't gonna be easy…," Ayato muttered to no one in particular as he mentally replayed the information Eishirou had given him on the Rot.

After discussing it with Julis and the others, they had concluded that there was a higher overall probability that the kidnappers were in one of the abandoned buildings. Still, there was something convincing about Irene's hypothesis, and it was too risky to discard it.

So they'd decided that Ayato would investigate the Rot. But this was turning out to be much more of a struggle than he'd anticipated.

For one thing, he had no idea how many businesses there were, and just as Irene had said, he couldn't simply barge into them. Each time he paused in his meandering, he was surrounded by shills trying to lure him inside, and more than once he was nearly dragged away. He couldn't sneak in when every establishment was crammed with people, and there were simply too many.

He had tried asking some of the solicitors about Flora, but of course he didn't receive a helpful response.

All the while, time marched on indifferently, and it was already late at night. Still, Main Street was filled with gaudy lights, and the crowds seemed to have grown.

According to Eishirou, the Rotlicht was deserted in the middle of the day. It would have been better to wait until then to investigate—unfortunately, they didn't have that luxury.

"But…something feels off," he mumbled to himself.

In this part of town, if you had a large enough pile of money, it wouldn't be hard to find someone who would provide a room, no questions asked. But such a provider's loyalty could be bought again. Would the kidnapper, an expert in clandestine activities, take that kind of risk?

Trying to organize his thoughts, Ayato strayed from the thoroughfare into a back alley.

Although surprisingly quiet, the back alleys were not as decrepit as the rest of the redevelopment area. Light spilled from scattered shop windows below dim streetlamps.

There were no solicitors here, nor even signs. But apparent patrons entered the establishments, so they had to be open for some kind of business. One such patron was dressed to show off wealth,

so maybe there was a high-end place with a membership policy.

Strolling slowly down the back alley, Ayato's mind raced. "If the kidnapper really is hiding out in the Rotlicht, then…"

"…Hey, you." A voice called to him from behind.

He turned around to find three menacing men eyeing him up and down.

"Uh… Can I help you?" Ayato asked. They practically radiated violence. If they were going to ask him anything, they wouldn't do it nicely.

"So you're the punk that's been sniffing around on our turf?"

"Yeah, you don't look like a cop… Come with us. We gotta talk."

They seemed to be with the mafia that ran the area. Although Ayato had been careful not to stand out, the nature of their business made this lot very cautious. They'd found him much sooner than he'd expected.

Like Saya and Kirin, he'd come in disguise—no more than fake eyeglasses and a hoodie, but it was something—so at least they had yet to realize who he was.

"Well, I'm just looking for someone, that's all…" As he spoke, Ayato quickly gauged the men's strength.

Judging from their unrefined prana and the way they carried themselves, they didn't seem to be formidable foes. By now Ayato could release his seal with a degree of freedom, so he'd be able to drive them off without too much trouble.

It wouldn't be wise to start trouble, but he couldn't tell them the truth either—which he doubted would satisfy them, in any case.

Then there was only one thing to do. Ayato turned and dashed away.

"Hey! Hold on, you!" Angry voices rang from behind, but of course he had no intention of holding on.

The question was whether he should head toward Main Street or farther into the winding passageways.

He didn't want to attract more attention, but during the time he'd rescued Priscilla in the redevelopment area, his unfamiliarity with the streets had gotten him cornered. Maybe hiding himself in a crowd would be a better idea.

The moment he made it back onto the street, he realized it had been a mistake.

He caught sight of several men radiating the same sort of

malevolence among the crowd.

Ayato knew he was in trouble, and he could feel the first group of pursuers closing in from behind. He couldn't turn back. But if he stayed on Main, it was only a matter of time until they found him. *What do I do…?*

After some hesitation, he was about to take a step forward when a murmur reached him.

"Hey, kid. Are you on the run?"

The voice was so quiet, it would have been easy to miss amid all the footsteps and hubbub. But it captured his attention like magic and led his eyes to its owner.

"If you're in trouble, I could help." A few paces in front of him, a girl stood against one of the pillars supporting the open-air corridors and revealed a thin smile.

She wore a bulky hat covering her head, and Ayato couldn't make out the details of her face, but she seemed to be about his age. Her chestnut hair was tied carelessly, and she wore jeans with a loose blouse. Overall, she didn't stand out much, and if she hadn't spoken to him, he would have simply passed her by without noticing or remembering her.

"Um…have we met somewhere?" Ayato asked, thinking her voice seemed a bit familiar.

“Hmm? I don’t think so…but what do you want to do? If you just stand there, those guys behind you will catch up.”

At her reminder, he checked, and the men were already almost upon him.

He didn’t know who she was. It could be a trap.

But somehow, Ayato could tell she wasn’t deceiving him. It wasn’t logic, but gut instinct. “All right. Can you help me?”

“Sure. Follow me!” The girl grabbed his hand, then started at a run toward the opposite alley.

The men noticed and chased after them, shouting, but the girl paid them no mind as she led Ayato this way and that. She apparently knew these streets like a native.

“…”

As the girl rushed along the narrow corridors, she sang under her breath. Her voice was too soft for Ayato to discern the words clearly, but he could detect a melody.

At the same time, Ayato sensed the mana stirring around her. *Is she a Strega…?*

He could feel the men receding behind them, and their voices grew distant.

At the same time, the scenery underwent a sudden transformation. Suddenly, they were among several crumbling urban structures.

The girl ran swiftly, her hand surprisingly soft in his. Her prana was so quiet that he hadn’t noticed at first, but if she was a Strega, then obviously she was a Genestella like he was. Judging from her age, she had to be a student, too.

Her breath stayed even despite the long dash, evidence of regular athletic training. But even so, Ayato couldn’t guess the extent of her abilities; she was hiding it well.

“Whew. I think we should be okay now.” Arriving at a vacant lot surrounded by decrepit structures, the girl turned to Ayato with a small smile.

“Thanks. You really saved me back there.” There was no way he could have escaped on his own.

The girl laughed. “So? What’d you do to get guys like that after you? They try to shake you down or something?”

“No, nothing like that… It’s complicated.”

She didn't seem to be an enemy, but he couldn't explain the situation to just anyone.

Hearing his evasive answer, the girl only nodded in understanding. "Mm, I get it. You don't have to explain." She took a seat on some construction debris. "You should wait before you go back, though. They won't chase you this far out of the Rotlicht, but things are a little tense right now, and they're not the sort to give up so easy."

"Tense?"

"You know, with the Festa. The city guard is way more strict than usual. So the mafia types running the Rot have more lookouts than usual."

"Oh, I see…"

During the Festa, people flooded into Asterisk from all over the world. It was only natural that there would be more visitors to the Rotlicht, too. While it was the norm for most things to go unchecked most of the time in the Rot, the city guard had to put extra personnel on the ground for this.

But if that was the case, the kidnapper had more reason not to hide out here. Not just because of the increased police presence, but because there would be fewer businesses willing to harbor trouble.

Then what if they're not in the Rotlicht after all…?

He thought he should begin looking somewhere else right away. He had no time to waste.

And yet there was something nagging at the back of his mind…

"Thanks for everything," he told the girl. "I'd like to thank you somehow, but I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Oh, don't worry about it—Ayato Amagiri."

"!"

He immediately jumped back.

She clapped her hands as if impressed. "Wow, nice reflexes. You didn't make it to the finals on dumb luck. But it hurts a little that you're so suspicious of me."

"…How did you know my name?" he asked cautiously.

The girl gave him an exaggerated shrug. "I'm sure you're trying to be incognito, but that's a pretty flimsy disguise. If you want to give people the slip, you need to change your aura, too. You're a celebrity now—you've got to step up your game a little, you know."

"Huh…?" It was true that Ayato hadn't spent a lot of effort on his disguise, but he was surprised to learn it was so obvious.

“Just so you don’t get the wrong idea, I didn’t help you because you’re Seidoukan Academy’s top-ranked.”

“Then why…?”

“It’s only natural to help someone in need, isn’t it?” She answered his question as if it were glaringly obvious. “Well, as much as I can, anyway. Besides, you don’t look like a bad guy.”

She was terribly straightforward. Again, he couldn’t imagine that she was lying. He had to apologize. “…Sorry to doubt you after you helped me.”

“You are a nice guy,” she laughed. “It’s not that I—”

She broke off, pursing her lips, and turned in the direction they had come from.

Ayato noticed an instant after she did.

Someone was heading toward them.

“Man, you had to run all the way out here… Spare a thought for the guy who has to come after you, would ya?” he drawled, stepping out into the moonlight.

He had a darkish complexion and stubble, and he looked around thirty—definitely not a student. He was dressed casually in cargo pants and a T-shirt, but with a bundle of Lux activators tied to his belt.

“So, you’re that dumbass who’s been snooping around? I hear you’re looking for someone, but you got our guys all worked up. I’m gonna have to bring you in.”

Although there was no energy in his murky eyes, the way he carried himself was characteristic of a well-trained fighter. Ayato could tell he had expertise.

“Aw, geez… I didn’t think they’d chase us all the way out here.” The girl looked skyward and clutched her hat to her head.

“I’m broke, y’know. I gotta work hard to make ends meet. So thanks for making some work for me, I guess… Huh?” The man stopped sauntering forward and opened his droopy eyes wide. A cold viciousness gleamed in their murky depths. “Well…they told me I was after a guy, but there’s a chick here, too. Ain’t that a lucky mistake. Now I’ve got some motivation.”

With a leering smile, the man activated a pair of Luxes, large knives with curved blades. He licked his lips in anticipation as he held one in each hand.

“My orders are just to bring you in—you can put up as much of a fight as you want. It wouldn’t be any fun if you didn’t.”

“Hold on. She has nothing to do with me.”

The man’s eyes were clearly on the girl. Ayato had to speak up about the misunderstanding.

“Um, I think you’re wasting your time,” she remarked. “He looks like the type to put his own interests above his job, so I don’t think he’ll let me go that easy. Isn’t that right, Nguyen? Alias Double Snake, Doi Ran, former rank seven of Jie Long Seventh Institute?”

“Oh, so you know about me, little lady? Isn’t that flattering.”

“I never dreamed a Lindvolus semifinalist would stoop to being a gofer for the mafia.” The girl sighed and slowly rose to her feet.

“Hey, it was a long time ago,” Nguyen said, tension filling the air.

This is bad, Ayato thought. If he had to fight this guy, he couldn’t let the girl get involved.

Just as he stepped forward to get between them, Nguyen hurled a knife at him in warning.

Ayato twisted to dodge it, but the timing was frighteningly accurate. It knocked him completely off balance.

“Stay outta the way, brat.” By the time Ayato had recovered, the man was already within reach of Ayato’s accomplice.

“Look out!” he cried as Nguyen’s other knife gleamed and slashed at the girl.

“Huh. That’s all you’ve got?”

As Nguyen attacked relentlessly from left and right, the girl deflected his blows with one hand.

“What?!” the man’s face contorted with disbelief.

Ayato was just as surprised.

Nguyen’s attacks were keen and swift. He was the type who preferred speed and frequency rather than power. Not even Ayato could have easily deflected every strike, especially not inside his attack range.

“Not bad, girly!” Nguyen laughed nervously. “Guess I’ll stop holding back!”

“No, I’ve seen enough.” The girl ducked under his arm and spun behind him.

She made it look like nothing, but taking advantage of such a slight opening was like threading a needle.

“Dammit!” Just as their assailant whirled around, the girl’s kick landed in his solar plexus.

"!"

Nguyen hurtled into one of the nearby building's walls, unable to scream as he passed out from the pain. The impact was strong enough that Ayato thought the building might crumble, and new cracks were spreading along the wall.

"…If you were in your prime, it wouldn't have been this easy," the girl said ruefully to Nguyen, who lay motionless, and quickly turned toward Ayato. "So…you're looking for someone?"

"Huh…?" Ayato blurted, still stunned.

"He mentioned it." The girl glanced at Nguyen.

"Oh—um, yeah."

"I might be able to help, if you want any help."

"Help? You?"

"Sure." The girl returned Ayato's question with a teasing smile. "But first…let's go somewhere else."

She pointed one slender finger upward.

*

The girl climbed lightly up the emergency staircase of a relatively intact abandoned building. Ayato followed, mentally replaying what he'd just witnessed.

Nguyen was a strong fighter. He might be past his prime, but if he'd advanced to the semifinals of the Lindvolus, he was the real deal. There were only so many people who could handle fighters like him with literally a single blow.

"Here we are!" When they had arrived on the roof, the girl turned to face him.

This seemed to be the tallest building in the vicinity. They had a decent view of the redevelopment area.

Above them, the sky was full of stars. But the eastern horizon was already turning cobalt. Dawn was approaching.

"Sorry to take your time when you're in a hurry," she said.

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, it's nice of you to help, but I can't get you involved. I've caused you enough trouble as it is."

"Hmm…" The girl nodded as if in approval. "I see. I think I'm starting to understand what kind of guy you are."

"Me?"

"Yup. Basically…you're kind enough to think of other people

even when you've got big problems of your own. At the same time, you try to shoulder everything on your own, and you won't lean on other people."

"Guh…" Her analysis was almost identical to Julis's. It left him tongue-tied.

"Your quarterfinal match was pretty good, though. The way you fought with Miss Riessfeld, you looked like an actual team."

"…You notice a lot."

True, the quarterfinal match had been a turning point of sorts for Ayato and Julis. But that wasn't something a casual spectator would catch.

"'Course I do. And I was watching today's match closely, too—well, yesterday's. The one where you didn't use the Ser Veresta. Or maybe you couldn't?"

"…"

She also had some impressive intuition.

"Oh, sorry," the girl said with a laugh. "I don't mean to pry. Well, anyway—can you tell me anything about the person you're looking for?"

"But I—"

"Don't worry, I won't follow you or anything. You just need to know where they are, right?"

As she spoke, the mana around them stirred, slowly gathering around her in a spiral.

"Are you…a Strega with an investigation ability?" He had suspected that she had some kind of powers, but if those powers favored detection, it might be possible for her to discover Flora's location.

"Not seeking, exactly, but…well, sort of related. I need some information to make an *image*, though."

"Right. I'm looking for a ten-year-old girl. Her name is Flora."

"Just to make sure, she's not lost, is she?"

"No. She's being held by someone. I have some guesses about who the kidnapper is, but nothing certain."

"Okay, I don't think I need anything there. Can you tell me about the girl—her appearance, her personality? And if you have a picture, I could use it."

Ayato told the girl everything he knew about Flora. But he'd only met Julis's young friend a few days ago. He didn't have a wealth of information to give. "I can ask someone who knows her

better, if you need more," he offered.

"No, it's fine. I think I have enough. Hold on." His companion looked down and began mumbling to herself.

Ayato couldn't tell what she was doing. But people often had their own rituals to activate their abilities, so it was probably something of that nature.

"There, that should do it." She clapped her hands and looked up. "But first, I need you to promise me one thing. Okay?"

"What kind of promise?"

"Promise me that you won't tell anyone what you're about to see."

"…Okay. I promise."

That seemed easy enough.

"Good. I'll get started. Let me see a map. The larger, the better."

Ayato took out his mobile device. He adjusted the air-window to the maximum size and displayed a map of the redevelopment area.

"Okay, this is—," Ayato began, then fell silent as the girl removed her hat and unbound her hair.

She touched her headphone-shaped accessory, and the color of her hair gradually changed.

It turned from chestnut to bright purple—the color of the sunrise unfolding at that very moment. Her subdued, quiet aura transformed into something dazzling and powerful.

It was then that Ayato recognized her breathtakingly sculpted face. To be fair, there probably wasn't anyone in Asterisk, or even the entire world, who would fail to recognize her now.

The supreme songstress. The greatest pop idol in the world.

The student council president and top-ranked fighter of Queenvale Girls' Academy, alias the Witch of Fearsome Melody, Sigrdrífa, semi-finalist of the last Lindvolus.

"Sylvia Lyyneheym…" Ayato whispered her name in awe.

Sylvia smiled at him, then stretched out her arms as if spreading a pair of wings. From behind, the newly risen sun bathed her in brilliance.

"Thought and memory, thou winged twins, fly, oh swiftly fly, and bring me the voice of a sweet child imprisoned."

A clear, strong voice, completely unlike before, intoned a mournful melody like a folk song.

Of course Ayato would recognize this voice. He had little

interest in the trends of the day, but even he knew her name, her face, and her singing voice.

"Beyond the clouds of dawn, upon the winds of twilight, from the edge of nightfall, lead us onward…"

As a storm of mana raged around her, Sylvia's song deftly manipulated and rearranged it.

She was the most famous singer in the world, and thus the most famous Strega. Even the Witch of Solitary Venom, Erenshkigal, two-time champion of the Lindvolus, couldn't surpass her in terms of fame.

And Sylvia's abilities were versatile.

Usually, Dantes or Stregas would employ their own core *images* to activate their powers. Not even someone with multi-faceted abilities like Julis could escape the limits of her mental imagery of fire and flowers.

But Sylvia Lyyneheym, it was said, could change her *image* freely by using song as a medium. Which meant that right now, she could use her powers for seeking.

In a way, her abilities were reminiscent of Seisenjutsu, which was a result of the pursuit of versatility. But her power was the complete opposite in nature. Whereas Seisenjutsu was a set of codified techniques, Sylvia achieved versatility by making her *images* fluid. In singing songs specific to an *image*, she could manipulate mana to give shape to all kinds of phenomena—although there were some limitations, such as prana consumption and her aptitude for different abilities.

The only type of skill she could not use was healing. But not even Seisenjutsu had successfully codified healing. Perhaps it was fundamentally different from other powers.

"Black emissaries of thought and memory, fly down to me and reveal now the truth…"

When Sylvia finished singing, two black feathers floated above the map, slowly revolving. They spun for several moments, but their circled grew tighter and tighter.

"Mm-hmm… It looks like she's outside the Rotlicht, in one of the northern corners," she announced nonchalantly.

Ayato still couldn't believe his eyes, but he quickly recovered. The girl in front of him might be the greatest superstar in the world, but if her powers were genuine, he had no time to waste marveling at them. "That's where Flora is?"

“Yeah. Pretty sure, unless they’ve taken some really strong measures against detection. I could narrow it down a little better if I had more time…”

“No, this is more than enough. Thank you—thank you so much.” Ayato bowed his head in gratitude.

They had been searching blindly until now, so narrowing down Flora’s location was a tremendous step forward. They didn’t have much time left, but now there was hope.

Sylvia gave him a small, delighted laugh. “I’m glad I was able to help. Well, I’ll get out of your hair. Actually, I’d better, or I’ll get an earful from my manager.” Looking satisfied, she placed her hat back on her head.

“Miss Lyyneheym, wait!” Ayato had so much to ask her, and so much gratitude to repay. But he didn’t have the time now. “Can you tell me how to reach you?”

“Wha…?” Her face went blank with surprise at his request.

At first, he couldn’t understand her reaction, but soon he did. “…Oh.”

He had asked her without thinking—her, the world-famous songstress. *She can’t just go around giving out her phone number*, he scolded himself.

But Sylvia studied Ayato’s face for a bit, then finally burst into laughter. “…Pfft! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like it! It’s been a while since anyone’s made such a direct move on me.”

“N-no, I wasn’t trying to make any moves…!”

“Call me Sylvie. That’s what people I actually like call me.”

With that, she took out her mobile device and turned it toward his. Ayato’s phone chimed as it received the contact.

“My personal contact,” she explained. “Get in touch anytime. Although I’ve been busy lately, so I might not be able to answer.”

“Uh, okay…” Ayato stood bewildered by the simplicity of the exchange.

“Actually, you’ve fascinated me for a while. And after seeing you in person, I think I’m even more intrigued,” she said brightly, pulling her hat deeper over her eyes, and tapped him lightly on the chest as she passed by him. “Good luck, Ayato. I’ll be praying for Flora’s safety, too.”

*

After parting from Sylvia, Ayato immediately sent the data on Flora's supposed location to the others.

Their response didn't take long. Multiple air-windows opened, first from Julis and Saya, then Eishirou.

"*It's fantastic that we have a place to look*," Julis said, "*but how did you narrow it down to this location?*"

"Um, well—sorry, I can't tell you."

Her question was only natural, but Ayato couldn't break his promise to Sylvia.

"Hmph, all right. I am curious, but we're short on time."

"*…Anyway*," Saya added, "*now that we've narrowed things down, we're almost there*."

"*Right*," Eishirou chimed in. *"I know that part of town, so I should be able to help."*

Julis nodded. *"It's settled, then. Let's all meet at—"*

"*But, Ayato and Julis*," Saya interrupted. *"You two shouldn't come along."*

"Huh?"

"What?"

Both responded simultaneously in surprise.

"*What are you talking about?!*" Julis cried. *"Why should* we *have to stay back?!"*

"*…You two have to fight in the championship*," Saya explained. *"You'll never make it if you meet us over there."*

"That's true, but…"

The demands of the kidnapper precluded them from forfeiting the Phoenix. And although they had a clue now, there was no guarantee they would be able to rescue Flora. They knew they still had to follow the kidnapper's instructions.

And yet…

"*The championship isn't until noon*," Julis insisted. *"We still have time!"*

"*No, Sasamiya is right*," Eishirou said, surprising Ayato. *"If the kidnapper is at this location, too, then we should keep the group small. Besides, if you get spotted before we rescue her, you'd have a hard time explaining yourselves."*

"*And it's reckless to fight in the championship like that*," Saya added. *"You should get all the rest you can."*

"Grr…!"

"But…!"

They both saw the logic of their friends' words, but it was unbearable to come so close and ultimately be unable to help.

"Ayato, Miss Julis—it's all right! We will definitely rescue Flora!" This time, it was Kirin who spoke.

"…" Julis had no reply. After a long pause, she let out an equally long sigh of defeat. *"Fine. Then we'll focus our energy on the championship."*

"Right," Ayato agreed.

Saya and the others were in the right, so Ayato and Julis would be selfish to push the issue. They had to yield.

"…Good. We save Flora, and you two avenge our loss. Then everyone's happy." Satisfied, Saya nodded.

"*Oh, that's right*," Julis said. *"You two* are *counting on us."*

"To be honest, it's a pretty tall order," Ayato said with an awkward smile.

He meant to lighten the mood, but the truth was, it would be no easy task to defeat the Puppets without the Ser Veresta. Without a solid plan, they might not even be able to put up much of a fight.

"*Nothing to worry about*," Saya said. *"As soon as we save Flora, you'll be able to use the Ser Veresta."*

"*If we make it in time*," Eishirou added playfully, inviting a glare from Saya.

Seeing them both, Ayato felt the tension leave his body.

They were all giving everything they had to their respective tasks.

And what Ayato had to do now was…

CHAPTER 6
TO EACH THEIR OWN FIGHT

“Number Seven, report.”

The irritated voice over the phone demanded only the pertinent information.

“No problems here.”

Gold Eye Number Seven of Grimalkin replied curtly with only that pertinent information.

“Good.”

“And on your end?”

“On the surface, things are going smoothly. No one’s contacted the city guard, and there’s no sign that Shadowstar’s gotten involved. But it’s not just the kids we have to worry about. Seidoukan has that sly vixen, too. Can’t really picture her staying out of this one.”

The Grimalkin-issue mobile devices never opened air-windows. It was possible to transmit images, but they spoke only through audio. And this particular device made contact with only one person: the student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

“Truth is, we also got word that someone’s been asking around about the brat. Well, I don’t have jurisdiction over there, as you know, so I can’t say how true that is.”

“…”

Despite popular belief, which held that the entirety of the redevelopment area was under the Le Wolfe Black Institute’s control, the actual situation was more complicated. Multiple mafia outfits held the real control, and their high-ranking members consisted of dropouts from various schools and criminals from outside Asterisk.

Of course, former Le Wolfe students made up the largest faction by far, and the ranks of those organizations included many current students as well. Organized crime and Le Wolfe had a strong connection. Historically speaking, it was true that the school had a fair amount of clout in those circles.

However, those circles did not get along well with the current student council president, Dirk Eberwein, and as a result, the relationship between the Rotlicht and Le Wolfe had cooled significantly. In fact, due to the active influx of students in anti-Dirk factions, some outfits were all but openly hostile to him.

Dirk had allowed all this to unfold.

The Grimalkin man did not know the reason why, nor did he want to know. That was not part of his duties. All he had to do was execute his missions to perfection.

He collected the information he needed for the assignment, but decisions belonged to a Cat's owner.

And so, as per usual, he asked his owner for instructions. "What if someone tries to interfere?"

"We've got a hostage. Use that. If they don't back down, you can get rid of her."

The man glanced at the girl sitting in a corner of the room. Perhaps she'd fallen asleep. Outside of occasional stirring, she didn't move at all.

"If we leave him to his own devices, that kid is gonna cause problems. We have to show him we mean business."

"Understood," the man answered crisply.

No matter how cruel the order, his heart never faltered. Though it was more accurate to say he'd never had one to start with.

He felt a change in the atmosphere around him. "…"

"*What's the matter*?" the voice asked suspiciously, perhaps sensing it from his silence.

"That interference we just discussed? I think it's coming."

With that, the man ended the call and looked up to the ceiling.

*

"…Are you sure this is it?" Saya asked skeptically, gazing up at the building.

"Well, this was the most suspicious place I could find. That's all.

I think the odds are pretty good, though." Eishirou shrugged, but his eyes were dead serious.

"You really have a lot of connections, Yabuki," Kirin said. "I'm impressed."

At the compliment, he grinned bashfully. "Aw, I'm not that impressive."

"…So that must mean you spend a lot of time here," Saya said.

"Uh… W-well, you know, it's complicated…" Eishirou awkwardly averted his gaze.

His recreational habits aside, the breadth of Eishirou's connections was beyond question.

While Ayato had narrowed it down, they still didn't know Flora's exact location. For Saya and Kirin, it was their first time in the Rotlicht. Many of the stores were closed for the day, and the larger twenty-four-hour casinos were most likely the only businesses bustling with activity. The streets were quiet, and the two had had difficulty gathering information. But Eishirou was easily able to find relevant clues at the shops where he was apparently a familiar face.

"So, what was it about this place that made it suspicious?" Kirin asked.

"Well, there used to be a pretty well-known casino in here. But it's been undergoing renovations recently."

Kirin regarded the building again. It was very large—five stories. It faced Main Street, but it was set farther from the curb than the other buildings, hidden in a dark crevice.

The lights weren't on at the moment, but the exterior, adorned with electric signs that would have added to the city glow at night, was relatively new. The building hardly seemed in need of renovation.

"From what I've heard, some patron went berserk," Eishirou went on. "It may look fine on the outside, but it's a mess inside."

"Wow… Pretty scary," Kirin said.

"Tenants turn over fast around here, and someone's always doing renovations. There're companies specializing in it," Eishirou explained. "But in this building, the work's been stopped for a few days."

"…Stopped?" Saya frowned.

Eishirou smirked as he explained the intrigue. "There was some trouble with the company in charge. The crime outfit running this

place is in a hurry, so I'm sure they'll find someone else to finish the work."

"…But until then, it's abandoned," Saya said.

"More or less."

The girls exchanged a glance, then nodded silently.

"So, why don't we take a look inside?" Eishirou said.

"B-but how…?" Kirin asked.

They had been searching mostly in tenements until now and had encountered no difficulties entering—although strictly speaking, it was trespassing, and the city guard would come down hard on them if they were caught. But things wouldn't be that easy here. Even if it was in the middle of renovations, a casino would have some sort of security system.

"Hey, just leave it to me. Keep an eye out, okay?" Eishirou withdrew his mobile device and connected it to the terminal next to the front entrance.

With a practiced hand, he typed at his optical keyboard, and the door opened with a hydraulic hiss.

"There. Piece of cake."

"…"

Saya and Kirin gaped at Eishirou's nonchalant attitude.

"Looks like the original security system went kaput when the inside was wrecked. The one they have in place now is just a cheap stopgap. They probably thought this was enough to get them through the renovation. Lucky us."

"But still…," Kirin began.

"…You're a little too good at that," Saya finished.

As they eyed him suspiciously, Eishirou rushed to defend himself. "N-no, no, seriously, this is nothing! I found the tools on the Net, and I've only tried it a few times before…"

"…"

Kirin and Saya still had their doubts, but this was no time to press the issue. It was almost noon. The championship match was about to begin.

"Well, c'mon, let's go in!" Eishirou said, brushing aside their suspicions. The two partners grudgingly followed.

"Whoa…" The inside of the building was in much worse shape than Eishirou had imagined.

The gambling equipment had already been removed, and the large central hall, with its high ceiling open to the second floor, sat

sad and empty with bare walls and pillars. For some reason, the ridiculously gaudy lights were left on, casting eerie shadows on the floor from the pillars.

There were several large holes in the ceiling, but it was hard to imagine that they were from the construction. That must have been caused by the rowdy patron. Clearly the renovation was necessary.

"It doesn't look like there's anyone here," Kirin said as she cautiously scanned the interior.

"I took a peek at the floor plans," Eishirou supplied. "This place should have six floors—five aboveground and a basement level."

There was a wide staircase at one end of the great hall leading to the second level. Behind it were stairs heading down. Off to the side was an elevator, but trying to use it would be a bad idea.

"…Up, or down?" Saya prompted.

"Hmm. Either way," Kirin said, "if the kidnapper is here, we shouldn't split up. Better to stick together."

"Yes, let's." Eishirou nodded emphatically. "I'm not much good in a fight."

Saya gave him a judgmental stare.

"…This is where the man is supposed to say 'Leave the fighting to me.'"

"Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses," he replied breezily. "And besides, I did try."

"Try what?"

"I'm not a fighter, so I called for someone who is. Well, I don't know if he'll come, but I did ask, so— What the hell is that?!"

They turned to see a writhing form rising from the shadow of a pillar.

"Is that…a person?" Kirin murmured, drawing the Senbakiri an inch out of its scabbard.

"…There's mana concentrated in that spot," Saya said. "Probably a conditional ability."

Which meant it was probably a trap or a defensive measure.

It appeared to be a person at first glance, as Kirin had said, but it was merely shaped like one—jet black, as if someone's whole shadow had been detached, and entirely smooth, with no clear front or back. Its arms ended in points like sharp horns, and it wasn't difficult to imagine their purpose. But overall, it did resemble a human silhouette.

"Well, we must have come the right way. Good work,

everyone." Eishirou had already retreated to the wall. He really did mean to leave all the fighting to the girls.

The shadow stood still for a while without so much as a fidget —and then suddenly rushed at Kirin.

She calmly cut it down in a single stroke. With the stroke from the Senbakiri, the shadow disintegrated like sand scattering in the wind.

The shadow was fast, but the attack was simple and easy to predict—and most of all, it was fragile. It was no match for Saya or Kirin.

"Oh, it wasn't that tough," Eishirou said. "Even I could handle something like th—"

His expression froze mid-word.

Another shadow rose up from among the pillars. Then another, and then another.

"These things— How many can there be?" Kirin wondered.

"…No idea," Saya replied.

The silhouettes rose up from every dark corner, and there were roughly fifty now. And still more were spawning.

"Ngh…!"

One after another, they attacked.

It took Saya barely an instant to activate a handgun Lux. She aimed rapid-fire to take down five shadows.

"Th-this has to be an autonomous ability! There's no way someone's controlling all of them individually!" Eishirou called, running across the hall to dodge the things.

That jogged Saya's memory. She recalled something Ayato had told her:

Silas, one of Ayato's earlier opponents, had seemingly possessed the ability to control over a hundred automatons—but he could only actually command a little over ten at a time. These shadows they were facing were not nearly as uniform.

"Things produced by autonomy abilities can only follow simple commands!" Eishirou added. "They've probably been ordered to get rid of any intruders!"

"…Makes sense. Then there's no need to engage them all," Saya stated.

She and Kirin still hadn't recovered completely from the semifinal. Specifically, Kirin's right leg was injured, and Saya's prana had yet to fully replenish. Although these were weak

enemies, the girls didn't have the stamina to take down every last one.

"…Kirin. Hold them off for me."

"Got it!"

They were perfectly coordinated. Kirin immediately saw what Saya had in mind, and took a step back and changed her stance in order to protect her.

Saya holstered the handgun and activated an enormous Lux with a large barrel.

In the semifinal match, more than half her arsenal was damaged badly enough to require repairs, but this one was relatively unscathed.

"Type 39 laser cannon Wolfdora—firing."

She squeezed the trigger, and a stream of light shot out. It drained an enormous amount of prana from her, enough that her vision went dark for an instant, but she shook her head and pressed on.

The cylinder of light swept through the shadows with a roar. When the great hall was quiet again, only the three students were left standing.

"Whew…," Saya sighed.

"Saya, are you all right…?" Kirin worried.

"…I'm good."

She tried to put on a strong front for Kirin, but it was taking longer for her prana to recover than she'd thought. Considering that she had been running about since the semifinal with hardly any rest, this was only to be expected. Still, she admitted to herself that she might be in bad shape.

Using small Luxes like handguns was one thing, but Saya's larger guns all used the Lobos transition method. Even one shot took as much prana as a Meteor Arts technique.

At this rate, I can only fire two or three more times at most…

As much as she wanted to thrash Flora's kidnapper, in her current state, it might have been best to avoid combat as much as possible. If the kidnapper handed over Flora without incident, that would be ideal. A fight was probably inevitable, but—

"Hey, you two! I don't think we can relax just yet!"

Saya looked up at Eishirou's shout.

"More—?!" Kirin blurted.

Shadows were spawning again from behind the pillar. There

were just as many as before—maybe more.

"There's no end to this…!"

Saya could hear the apprehension in Kirin's voice.

There was no option but to force their way through. The horde of shadows writhed between them and the stairs. Breaking past the things would be easy enough if they were at full strength, but in their current condition, success was much less certain.

Still, it would be much better than continuing to wear themselves out fighting.

"…Kirin, it's a bit risky, but we have to cut through."

"Yes. There's no other way."

Kirin was of the same mind, and they nodded to each other.

The shadows lunged at them like an avalanche. But just then—

"Tch! What're you people doing?!"

A ferocious blast from the side annihilated the entire horde at once.

"Well, you're finally here! It's about time!"

Eishirou welcomed the newcomer with applause as Saya and Kirin stood, stunned.

"…Lester MacPhail… What are you doing here?" wondered Saya.

The irritably scowling newcomer was none other than Lester MacPhail, ninth-ranked fighter at Seidoukan Academy.

"Yabuki dragged me out here! You think I wanted to come?!" he shouted, holding a giant halberd Lux.

"Aw, c'mon, 'dragged' you? All I did was ask nicely."

"Your idea of 'asking nicely' is threatening a guy's weak point? That's called *blackmail*!"

Of course. That did sound like Eishirou's MO.

Still, Lester had just saved them. A new wave of shadows now faced the latest intruder. This was a chance they could not afford to miss.

"…MacPhail, we'll leave it to you."

"S-sorry about this! Thank you!"

The two bid their farewells—Saya plainly and Kirin politely and apologetically—as they cut into the swarm of shadows.

"What?! Hey, hold on!" Lester's bewildered voice called from behind them, but they had no time.

"So, Kirin—up or down?" Saya asked as she opened a path with the handgun Lux.

“What do you think, Saya?” Kirin asked back, swinging the Senbakiri relentlessly.

“…Down.”

There was no reason behind her choice, just a hunch.

“I think so, too,” Kirin replied with a smile.

Meanwhile…

“Okay, MacPhail. Good luck.”

Saya and Kirin vanished past the shadows, and then Eishirou too dashed away with a simple farewell.

Lester was left in the hall with the swarm.

It had all started last night. Eishirou had called him out of the blue and talked him into helping before he knew it.

Lester had no idea how the other boy had come by his secret, but that didn’t matter now.

Eishirou had explained the situation briefly, and Lester had little regard for anyone who would abduct a small child for their own ends.

What he did have, though, was plenty of frustration to vent after his elimination in the third round of the Phoenix.

“…Still, seriously—,” Lester muttered, hanging his head as the shadows rushed at him.

With a single swing of his halberd, he sent the swarm flying back.

The windows rattled as he bellowed at the top of his lungs. “How did I get stuck doing this alone?!”

*

Ayato checked the time and turned to his partner, who was on the prep room sofa with her eyes closed. “It’s about time, Julis.”

“…All right,” she replied curtly, then stood and stretched. “Well. No word from Saya and the rest of them.”

“…”

The pair couldn’t risk calling them without knowing the situation on the other end. And the fact that Saya and Kirin hadn’t tried to contact them was a bad sign.

But Julis only gave a quiet, helpless laugh. “Don’t look so defeated already, Ayato. Come on, let’s go.”

She opened the door.

How many times had he and Julis walked down this passageway leading to the arena? It felt like ages ago that they had first made this walk to their initial Phoenix match. But in reality, it had been only two weeks.

"You know, Ayato," Julis murmured, "it's good to have friends I can rely on."

"Huh?" The unexpected words stopped him in his tracks.

She halted, too, and continued, as if she was thinking aloud. "The thing is…to me, Flora and everyone back home are more important than anything. I swore to do anything for them, and I thought they were all I needed. But, looking back, I can see that I was just closing myself off and making my world smaller. I understand that, now that I have a—a partner like you, Ayato."

"Julis…"

"I can make more friends who are just as dear to me as the ones I have at home. Like Saya and Kirin." Julis looked straight into Ayato's eyes and smiled shyly. "Now, I can truly trust them. So don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"Okay… That's good to hear."

They started walking again, side by side, until they reached the stage.

Julis let out a short breath and squeezed her fists tight as they proceeded through the gate.

"*And now, from the east gate, Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld! Over the last two weeks, we've seen all sorts of crazy battles in this Phoenix tournament, but we're here at last—the championship!"*

"*Yep, can't wait to see it.*"

The flashes of light were blinding.

"It's funny," Julis said under her breath. "Even with all this going on…I *really* want to win this match."

"Yeah, me too," replied Ayato.

She nodded happily. "Then let's give this our best shot. Let's make all our wishes come true."

"Every last one."

Ayato and Julis gazed ahead at the two autonomous Puppets.

One, with a towering frame that seemed to pierce the sky, roared with laughter. "Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! So we meet at last, Ayato Amagiri! I have been waiting so long for this moment!"

"Uh-huh…," Ayato replied with significantly less enthusiasm.

"I have heard much about you from my master, and I have

nothing but the highest expectations! I hope you will stir inside me an excitement greater than even Saya Sasamiya and Kirin Toudou did!" Ardy traced the katana scar that ran from his forehead straight down to his cheek, and his huge body trembled with glee.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't promise that…" Ayato kept his expression neutral, though his opponent's high spirits were a little off-putting. "But we're going to win this match. No matter what."

"Hmph! Those words are all the assurance I need!" Staring into Ayato's eyes, Ardy nodded in satisfaction. "Now, I'll just hope you are as worthy of respect as our previous opponents. And to—"

"The match is about to start, and here you are prattling on about nothing, you hulking oaf," Rimcy interrupted coolly from beside him. "Your big lump of a body isn't even fuel-efficient, so at least have some modicum of restraint. You could do us all a favor by not opening your mouth ever again."

"Hrm… But clearly, now you're speaking more than I am?"

"Were my instructions to stop running your mouth unclear?"

As a giant gun Lux materialized in Rimcy's arms, Ardy at last clamped his mouth shut.

"…I knew they were weird, but for Puppets, they are truly bizarre," Julis muttered, slightly amazed.

Ayato laughed. "I'm sort of glad we're up against them for the championship, though."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Because we can face them without anything holding us back."

Irene or the Jie Long twins, for instance, were strong enough to advance to the final, but either team would have made for a very different battle.

"Well, they're worthy adversaries, that's for certain." Julis activated her Aspera Spina.

When Ayato activated a blade Lux, the arena erupted with murmurs of surprise.

"*Wow, it looks like Amagiri is shelving the Ser Veresta again!*" the announcer remarked.

"*You kinda have to conclude that he can't use it, rather than won't,*" quipped the commentator. *"Orga Luxes, in general, are known for being difficult to handle, so. Especially the Ser Veresta. Could be they're on the rocks."*

"There are rumors that an application has been put in for an emergency freeze— Oh, and we're seconds away from starting! Ladies

and gentlemen, here it is, the last match of the Phoenix! Which team will come out on top?!"

Ignoring the excited trilling of the announcer, Ayato concentrated. The match was to begin at noon exactly.

Three—two—one—

"Phoenix Championship Match—Battle Start!"

The crest on his chest gave the final announcement. Ayato unbound his power and headed straight to Ardy—

—with Julis at his side.

"Oh-ho!" Ardy crowed in anticipation.

"*Hmm! Is Team Amagiri-Riessfeld trying to take out Ardy right away?!*" the announcer wondered.

"*It's textbook strategy to focus on one opponent. But Riessfeld's usually on defense—we don't often see her come to the front*," noted the commentator.

The assessment was accurate. Ayato and Julis had determined that the most fearful aspect of facing the two Puppets was the actual combination, when they physically joined together to overwhelm Saya and Kirin.

The simplest way to deal with that was to defeat one of them first.

Considering their defensive abilities, it would be logical to target Rimcy first. But she had the flight module. If she were to escape to the air, the advantage of fighting two-on-one would vanish.

"Here we go, Julis!"

"Right!"

Ayato quickly steadied his breathing and readied his sword. There was no reason to hold back now. "Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—Nine-Fanged Blade."

A ninefold combination sequence with five thrusts and four different slashing strikes. It was the most difficult of the middle-level techniques, but Ardy's barrier went up instantly to block each one.

The male robot laughed boastfully. "Too bad I already have the data on that attack!"

"…I thought you might," Ayato replied.

"Hrm?"

Ardy was bewildered at his self-assured smile.

Ayato had used that technique against Silas's dolls. Ernesta had created those puppets, so it was no surprise that she had collected the data then and passed it on. He and Julis had already thought of that.

"Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*"

Immediately, a wave of intense heat rose up behind Ayato.

Ardy's barrier was indeed like a shield—it could defend only a limited area at a time. What made it the Ultimate Shield was the capacity to fling it up instantaneously, in any direction.

But it would be difficult for him to defend against simultaneous attacks from multiple directions.

Ardy grunted as he swept aside the rushing flowers of flame with his giant hammer. Although Julis had activated her powers at much closer range than usual, her control was impeccable.

Meanwhile, Ayato stepped in for his next attack. "Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique—*Twin Serpents*."

Naturally, he targeted Ardy's school crest. But then—

"You must feel awfully confident to leave me unchecked."

Before he could attack, a swirling stream of light approached Ayato and Julis from the side.

It was the Ruinsharif, the weapon embedded in Rimcy's left arm.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Ayato grabbed Julis by the hand to narrowly pull her away from the blast. "We're keeping our eyes on you, too."

"What?!" Rimcy was surprised enough that her eyes went wide—a rare occurrence. She must have thought that she'd attacked with perfect timing.

True, it would have been difficult for Ayato to dodge it under normal conditions. But now, with his power unleashed, his senses were broadened to their limits. He was able to take in all the information around him as if he were watching from above.

This was known in the Amagiri Shinmei style as the state of *shiki*.

Generally, it was more effective when facing multiple opponents. In one-on-one combat, it was not very useful and expended energy needlessly.

But Julis had come up with a daring plan that involved this technique.

As the commentator had pointed out, defeating one opponent to create a two-on-one situation was the most textbook strategy in two-on-two team battles. But that strategy came with the obvious risk of leaving one opponent free to attack from the side.

If Ayato could use *shiki* to grasp the entire field, however, he would know Julis's movements as well as Ardy's and Rimcy's. Then, if Rimcy attacked as she just had, so long as Julis was close by, he could guide her out of the way.

Of course, this was only a theoretical option, made marginally practical by Ayato's fast reflexes. And they would still be defenseless against attacks that he could not evade. (Kirin's Linked Cranes, for example, would be impossible to evade even in the state of *shiki*.) And above all, this tactic would be impossible if Julis did not trust Ayato unconditionally.

But this does allow us to significantly lower the risk of fighting two-on-one—!

They did not expect the advantage to last, given how quickly Ardy and Rimcy learned, but nor did they intend the match to last long.

"Ayato, let's finish him!"

"Got it!"

Julis was completely focused on Ardy.

She and Ayato fought so close together that they almost collided. The only reason they didn't was because of his *shiki*.

"Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*"

Countless flames rose up from the ground, swirling into chakrams of fire. This time, she'd emphasized numbers over power, making smaller chakrams than usual. Well over twenty searing wheels rushed at Ardy.

"Guh!"

The target of Rimcy's defense was now not Ayato or Julis, but the chakrams. And while she did learn fast, her bullets of light shooting down chakrams one after the other, there was no way she could handle so many.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Ten-Thorned Thistle*." Ayato twisted to land two consecutive blows.

"Ungh!"

Ardy let out a bellow as he deflected the attacks inches from his school crest, while several chakrams carved shallow ridges into his armor.

Ayato then repositioned his sword and changed direction, swiftly closing in on Rimcy.

"?!"

She was startled, as she had been concentrating on covering Ardy, but she wasted no time switching her aim onto Ayato.

Still, he was one step ahead.

With a shout, he dodged the barrage of bullets from Rimcy and struck from a low stance, slicing the gun in her right hand in half. But just as he was about to land another attack, a wall of light blocked him—Ardy's barrier.

Ayato sidestepped to slip around it, but Rimcy's flight unit carried her into the air.

But that, too, was what Julis and Ayato had been expecting.

"Ha—just what we were waiting for…!" Julis said to herself.

Watching the Puppets' match against Saya and Kirin, they had noticed that Ardy's barrier took less time to deploy close to him. There was a lag when he used it to protect someone farther away.

"Blossom—*Gloriosa!*" Julis brought down the Aspera Spina, and a magic circle appeared on the ground. Giant claws of fire erupted to crush Ardy in their grasp.

"Rrrrgh! This is nothing!"

To her disbelief, Ardy swung his hammer to blow away the flames and escape the trap by force.

"Phew…!"

He groaned in relief. His armor was peppered with singed spots, but he had avoided significant damage.

"What is that armor made of…?!" Julis clicked her tongue in frustration and regrouped with Ayato.

"Guess we have to start over," he said.

"You do realize the same tricks won't work on them twice?" She calmed her breath and glanced at the Puppets to see that they had retreated to a distance. They seemed to be regrouping as well. "I have to admit, it hurts that we weren't able to get him with that offensive. This strategy should work for a little while longer, I think, but…"

Without the Ser Veresta, there was almost nothing either one could do to penetrate Ardy's barrier. Julis attacking at full power was a possibility, but Ayato doubted that their opponents would sit idly by while she took the time to charge up.

"Do you have a sword technique like the one Kirin used?" Julis

asked. “Something to manipulate that barrier…?”

“That was only possible because that’s Kirin’s—well, the Toudou style’s strength. I could try something similar, but not at that level. Besides, it might have worked on Ardy before, but I don’t think it would now.”

By the end of the semifinal match, Ardy had learned to adapt to Kirin’s serial attacks.

“So our only option is to overwhelm them with rapid attacks,” Julis muttered, looking resigned.

Just then, Ardy’s raucous laughter echoed through the arena. “Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wonderful! Truly wonderful! That was a better combination attack than I could have imagined, Ayato Amagiri, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld! I know that we are evolving with each passing day. But it seems you may well surpass us. So, we have no choice but to introduce you to our ace in the hole.”

The crowd clamored.

“Wow, Ardy came out and said it! Does this mean we’re about to see them combine?!”

The announcer played up Ardy’s words for the audience, but for Ayato and Julis, it was a grave situation.

“Well, if it were up to me, we would have done this from the start,” Ardy added. “But Rimcy would not allow it.”

“…Of course not. Master has told us time and time again not to use that power lightly.” Rimcy gazed at him coolly and let out a long, theatrical sigh. “But it does appear that there is no other way to defeat you two. Whether I like it or not.”

“…Did you think we’d just stand around and let you combine?” Ayato readied his sword.

Despite Ardy’s and Rimcy’s comments, in reality the two teams were evenly matched, and that was being generous to Ayato and Julis. The latter had seemed to have the advantage because Julis’s plan worked perfectly, but it was clear that the situation would be reversed if the battle dragged on.

“You must know that you leave yourselves vulnerable as you combine,” Julis said. “We’re not going to miss that opportunity.”

Ayato silently agreed with her. Saya and Kirin had been cautious because it had been their first time seeing it, but Ayato and Julis knew what to expect, so they would not hesitate.

“You’re quite right,” Rimcy said. “That maneuver takes some time, and it would be easy for you to defeat us in the process. But

do you really think that our master hasn't prepared for that?"

She extended her left hand—the Ruinsharif—straight up.

"Ruinsharif, mode *Wolkenwulf*—maximum output."

The Ruinsharif transformed. Now it was more like a giant cannon.

"Not so fast…!" Ayato leaped at her. But before he could reach her, a huge shell of light shot out from the Ruinsharif. It was surprisingly slow, and it hovered in midair above the stage.

"Julis, get back!"

With no further warning, the shell burst, scattering countless tiny bullets of light.

Ayato tried to close in on Rimcy through the hail of bullets, but that was no easy task, even with *shiki*.

"Purging ACM unit, first exterior armor, Luxes," Rimcy intoned. "Transferring limit control."

In the meantime, Rimcy and Ardy steadily prepared to combine.

"So this is what it comes down to…!" Ayato resigned himself to suffering some damage as he lunged into the storm. As powerful as the original shell was, if he channeled all of his prana to defense, he should be able to endure these tiny fragments.

He winced. The impact was significantly stronger than he had anticipated, but he hurtled through. "I've got you now!"

"…A valiant attempt, Ayato Amagiri."

Ayato swung his sword with all his might as he shot past Rimcy.

The blade cut through her crest. But—

"You're one step too late!" Ardy laughed.

Rimcy's flight unit had already separated to combine with Ardy.

"Camilla Pareto—badge broken."

The crest announced Rimcy's defeat using Camilla's name, since Rimcy was fighting as Camilla's proxy and wore her crest.

"Combination, complete!" Looming even larger than before, Ardy created a gust of wind with his hammer, strong enough to blow away grown men.

"Oh, settle down," Rimcy scolded. "Now the rest is up to you."

"Mm-hmm! Thank you!"

Rimcy retreated with deliberate steps, and Ardy came forward.

"So, let us begin the second round!"

*

As soon as Kirin and Saya arrived in the basement, they faced a massive door. But at least it was an ordinary door that opened by hand, without electronic locks.

After they fought the shadows upstairs, if the kidnapper was here, he would already know of their presence. They had no intention of sneaking around now, but the enemy had a hostage. It seemed wise to decide their roles in case there was trouble.

"Saya, let me go first."

Even though she was injured, it was Kirin's job to take the lead.

"…Right." Saya could take stock of the overall situation and act as needed.

Seeing her nod, Kirin slowly opened the door.

They found before them a large, open room, much like the main hall upstairs. But while the one on the ground floor was two stories high, the ceiling here was lower, and there were many more pillars.

A few lantern-like fixtures illuminated various points in the room, but they weren't the building's actual lighting, so the space was still dim. There were a couple of hanging work lights that were much brighter than the rest, however, and one of them highlighted a small girl. Her hands and feet were bound, and she leaned listlessly against a pillar.

"Flora!"

At Kirin's shout, she raised her head, startled.

"Mmmf!" She shook her head fiercely, trying to talk through the gag, but her words were unintelligible.

Suddenly, Kirin felt a menacing presence and leaped sideways.

A moment later, a huge black spike like an enormous thorn or an oversized sea urchin spine, shot out from the shadow of one of the pillars and pierced the space where Kirin had stood.

More spikes flew out at her, one after another.

"Ngh…!" A tiny groan escaped her as she withstood the pain shooting down her leg and barely managed to dodge each projectile. It was impossible to predict where the next one would come from.

He made those silhouettes on the ground floor. His power uses shadows as weapons—!

With so many light sources in the room, each object cast multiple shadows. Kirin had to pay attention not just to the floor,

but the walls and ceiling, too. This space was set up to maximize the user's power.

He wasn't actually controlling the shadows, though. He was using shadows as the core of his *image* and gathering mana there.

"So you're Kirin Toudou. I seem to have caught a pretty big fish."

The attacks stopped suddenly, and a man materialized from the dark shadow of the pillar where Flora was resting. His eyes were cold and dead, sending a shiver down her spine. His voice had a similar emotionless chill.

"…Are you the kidnapper?"

Instead of answering Kirin's question, the man wagged his finger. A spike extended from Flora's shadow and stopped against her throat.

"If you get in my way, I can't promise you'll have the girl back alive."

"N-no…! Please stop this! That would only harm you!"

If—it was too awful for Kirin to imagine—but *if* he were to do such a thing, there would be no point. The kidnapper's objective would go unaccomplished, and he would only add to his crimes.

But the man's stone-cold stare simply bored into Kirin. "I will tell you one thing. I don't care what happens to me."

The words were chilling; Kirin could tell he meant them. This man would not hesitate to follow through on his threat if she failed to comply.

"First, drop your weapon."

"…Ngh."

Disobeying was not an option. Resigned, Kirin slowly laid the Senbakiri on the floor, and—

"Kirin! Get Flora!" Saya's sharp call rang through the basement.

Something shot through the spike against Flora's throat and scattered it into dust.

An instant later, there was a dull gunshot and a flash of brilliant light.

A flare—!

The harsh light temporarily wiped away the multitude of shadows, leaving a few new ones. That meant they could tell where the next attack would come from.

Kirin picked up the Senbakiri and hurtled toward Flora. The pain in her leg didn't matter now. She didn't care if it fell off.

The man frowned slightly and waved his finger. Mana writhed as a new spike emerged from Flora's shadow.

"I don't think so!" Kirin's swordstroke cut down the spike just in time, and she rolled to grab Flora in her arms. To cover them, a rapid-fire barrage of light bullets blasted from the doorway toward the kidnapper.

"This marksmanship—this must be Saya Sasamiya." The man dodged effortlessly, but now Kirin had all the time she needed.

With Flora in her arms, she ran to the entrance—and then her right leg gave out.

"Gah…!"

Gritting her teeth in pain and using all her strength to keep from falling down, Kirin untied Flora's bindings.

"Kirin!" Saya called from outside.

"I-I'm fine! Take Flora!" She ripped Flora's gag free.

"M-Miss Toudou! Thank you!" Flora burst out, on the verge of tears.

"Don't mention it. Hurry, go through there—!" Kirin forced a smile to set Flora's mind at ease and gave her a firm push toward the door.

All the while, spikes flew at them from the surrounding shadows. Saya shot down every one.

"Okay!" Scrubbing at her tears, Flora started running. She was a Genestella, if still a child, and she made it to the doorway quickly.

Seeing her pass through, Kirin faced the man again. "Well…? Now what are you going to do?"

"What else? I'm going to eliminate the two of you and get the girl back."

Apparently he had no intention of letting them go.

An inky black blade extended from the man's arm—not a Lux, but a real blade. It was no larger than a dagger, but it seemed to be attached directly to his arm, probably because he preferred his hands free.

"Then on my life, I cannot let you pass."

Kirin held up the Senbakiri.

Judging from the fight thus far, there were definitely limitations on his ability.

First, he could not move his shadows rapidly. If he could, he would have impaled Kirin a long time ago.

This led her to guess at another constraint: The man could use

his ability only with shadows he could see directly. The shadows upstairs had used a conditional ability, so he had to have been able to see them when setting it up.

An ability specialized for surprise attacks and assassinations, she thought. It would be fearsome in those contexts, but a head-on fight was another story entirely. Attacks from her blind spot would be troublesome, but luckily, Kirin had Saya to back her up. She could rely on her partner's marksmanship for that.

But Kirin soon discovered that she was being too optimistic.

"Guh…!"

The man slashed at her, and she blocked with the sword. He aimed for a vital spot with deadly precision, and the blow was heavy.

Kirin deflected it upward, but the man quickly regained his balance to counter with a swift thrust.

Judging that she couldn't parry, Kirin jumped sideways—but her right leg dragged. The black blade grazed her left arm, slowing her down, and the man's knee drove deep into her stomach.

"!"

She almost crumpled to the floor, but she couldn't allow herself to go down. Summoning all her strength, she leaped back to distance herself from him.

A spike shot out at her from the shadows as she landed, but Saya dealt with it.

He's good. It wasn't that Kirin had underestimated him. She also had the handicap of her leg to deal with. But she wasn't sure she could defeat this man, even at her full strength.

Kirin had superior swordsmanship, but he held an overwhelming advantage in hand-to-hand combat. And there wasn't a modicum of uncertainty in his attacks. His fighting technique was entirely honed to one purpose: to destroy his opponent.

Kirin guessed that Saya had her hands full protecting Flora and managing the shadows under his control.

She might have a chance using the Linked Cranes, but that would be difficult with her injury.

I have to take the chance—but what if I fail…?

But the man didn't give her the opportunity to think. With a surprisingly quiet stride, he closed in to unleash a sequence of strikes—her throat, then her chest, her temple, her lower abdomen. He attacked with blade, fist, and leg. Every blow was aimed at a

vital spot, and each one would have ended the fight if it landed.

"It's over," the man whispered suddenly.

"Huh?"

He had vanished from sight.

In that moment, Kirin realized she had fallen into his trap.

There was a wall in front of her. With the light behind her, she cast her own shadow against it.

I'm in the way. Saya can't shoot—!

"Kirin, move!"

At Saya's shout, she flung herself away—a moment too late. The spike from her shadow pierced right through her side.

The pain was like a searing lump of hot iron pressing into her. She couldn't hold back a scream as red soaked through her clothes, and the strength drained from her body.

Kirin almost dropped the Senbakiri, but she bit her lip to hold on. Hands shaking, she slashed through the spike…but that was all she could manage. She used her sword as a crutch to keep from falling.

"I hit a vital spot. You're bleeding too much to fight. If you don't get treatment quickly, it'll cost you your life," the man informed her with clinical detachment, moving nonchalantly toward the door.

"I'm…not done yet." With unsteady steps, Kirin blocked his path.

"And what can you do, with those injuries?"

The man's voice held neither ridicule nor contempt. It was as though he were simply speaking the truth.

And it was the truth. She had perhaps one swing of her katana left.

"Would you like…to find out?"

Even if she had only one swing left, she wouldn't give up without taking it.

Kirin took a few measured breaths, then sheathed the Senbakiri and adjusted her stance.

“A quick-draw attack…?” The man narrowed his eyes with caution. He did not let his guard down for an instant.

“Toudou Style Sword-Drawing Technique—*Folded Wing*,” she murmured, drawing the Senbakiri.

—Or so it seemed to him.

“What…?”

For the first time, surprise surfaced in his stony eyes.

In fact, Kirin had yet to so much as unsheathe the Senbakiri.

But on reflex, he was already in motion to respond to the feint.

From her perspective, he’d left himself wide open.

The Senbakiri slid out of its scabbard and arced through the air.

Its point cleanly severed tendons in both his arms.

“Impossible…”

The master technique of the Toudou style was the Linked Cranes—unrelenting serial attacks. But the principle behind that technique lay in using the opponent’s sightline, breathing, movements, and mannerisms to manipulate them.

Taking this principle to its practical extreme produced the Toudou style’s sword-drawing attack—a mirage that made the opponent see a sword being drawn while it was still in the scabbard. This was the first time that Kirin had successfully used it in actual combat.

“Ugh…!”

But she had reached her physical limit, and she stumbled to her knees.

Meanwhile, the man still stood, though his arms hung limply at his sides. “An impressive move, but not enough to finish me. I can still—”

Before he finished the sentence, he was engulfed in a maelstrom of light.

“Nope. You’re done.” The shot from Saya’s Wolfdora blasted the man into the wall, which crumbled from the impact. The shower of debris buried him.

Kirin knew that her partner wouldn’t miss the opening. She’d knelt to give her a clear shot and left the rest to her. She had full faith in Saya.

“Kirin, hold on!”

“Miss Toudou! Miss Toudou!”

As Saya and Flora ran toward her and her consciousness faded, Kirin’s thoughts turned to Ayato and Julis.

Right… What happened in their match…?

*

Overwhelming.

There was no better word to describe his strength.

Ardy roared with laughter. “What’s the matter, Ayato Amagiri?”

Ayato barely dodged Ardy’s hammer, then rounded behind him and swung his sword.

Of course, the attack never reached its target and was absorbed by the defensive barrier.

On top of that, another barrier sprang up to hurl Ayato away, and Ardy swept sideways with the hammer at his airborne body. Ayato reached out to drag his sword against the ground, changing his trajectory enough to dodge the attack.

“Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*” Julis’s fireballs rushed at Ardy, but they were also foiled by multiple barriers.

“What the hell?!” Julis fumed. “He’s so strong now, it’s just absurd!”

“My feelings exactly…!” Ayato distanced himself from Ardy to regroup with her, then nodded with a pained smile.

Ever since the semifinal, Ayato had thought Ardy’s strength was abnormal.

From his basic specs like strength and speed to the power of his weapons—he was enhanced in every way imaginable. Even if Rimcy’s entire power source had been channeled into him, it couldn’t possibly have increased his power output by this much.

What was even more terrifying was that he was even stronger than he’d been back then.

“He didn’t put up multiple barriers at once when he fought Saya and Kirin!” Julis protested.

Being a fast learner was one thing. This was on another level entirely.

Luckily for them, Ardy was not attacking with much aggression. He seemed to want to enjoy this fight for as long as possible.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Wonderful!” the Puppet crowed. “My body is overflowing with strength! And I can harness it far better than I could before! What joy! What splendor! This is the true power my master has bestowed upon me!”

“True power…?” With that phrase, one possibility arose in Ayato’s mind. “Hey, Julis—what if Ardy had these specs all along?”

What if combining with Rimcy was a way not to make him *more* powerful, but to unleash power he *already had*?

“Like with your seal?” Julis asked. “It’s not impossible, but why would they—? Ayato!”

Alerted by her shout, he saw Ardy hold out his hammer like a rifle, with the head pointed at him.

“Take this—my Wolnir Hammerrrr!” Ardy bellowed, and with a boom that shook the air, the head of the hammer barreled toward them.

“Julis, hang on!” Ayato pulled her close and leaped sideways.

After the ensuing explosion propelled them away and sent them tumbling on the ground, they quickly regained their stances—and saw that the entire blast radius of the hammerhead was now a crater.

“That move seems more powerful than before, too…,” muttered Julis beside him.

It was already destructive enough, but now, even if they avoided a direct hit, they might be hurt by the shock wave.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I’m not done yet!” Ardy laughed.

Ardy caught the returning hammerhead with the shaft, and immediately aimed it again.

“That thing can do rapid-fire, too…?!”

“Julis, run!”

The two dashed along the outer edge of the stage. Explosion after explosion chased them.

“Is this a bad time to ask if you have a plan?” Ayato wondered.

“It is, actually! But maybe if we could do something about that barrier…”

They were both racking their brains as they ran, but it would be difficult to overcome such a dramatic difference in strength.

“Hrm. Unlike Rimcy, I’m no great marksman. Can’t seem to hit anything— Oh, wait.” As if a brilliant idea had struck him, Ardy broke into laughter. “Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Of course! What if I try *this*?!”

Suddenly, a barrier sprang up to block Ayato and Julis's path.

"Wh-what, now?!" Julis cried.

They tried to change direction, but multiple barriers had already materialized to surround them.

"Now you'll have a hard time dodging!"

As Ardy beamed, his hammer hurtled toward the pair.

"Ngh…!"

"Argh…! Burst into bloom—*Anthurium!*"

She promptly formed a shield of flame, but the hammer broke through it with no trouble. Ayato jumped in front of her, prana focused. They were swallowed by a concussive wave that felt powerful enough to rip him limb from limb, and his sight went dark for a moment; he slammed into a barrier with enough force that he could hear his bones creak. It felt like someone had stomped on all his organs. "Ngh…ugh…"

And that was after I shifted all my prana to defense…

Wiping the blood from his mouth, Ayato slowly got to his feet. "Julis… Are you all right?"

"More or less, thanks to you…" Julis had also taken significant damage, but she managed to stand with a sardonic smile. "You saved me."

But they would be unable to withstand another attack like that.

"Oh-ho, on your feet again after that? Impressive!" Even as he showered them with praise, Ardy retrieved the hammerhead when it returned to him, already aiming anew.

Ayato could tell he was gathering power to it.

I'll have to sacrifice myself and hope for the best—!

Even if he was disabled in taking down Ardy, as long as Julis remained, they would win the match. He doubted he could penetrate Ardy's barriers even with a suicide attack—but it was better than losing without trying.

And as he steeled himself and adjusted his sword grip—

"Ardy is just dominating down there! Will this final championship match come to a— Huh?! E-excuse me?!"

"Whoa, whoa! What's going on?!"

Suddenly, a pair of confused voices from the broadcasting booth rang out through the arena.

Immediately after came a voice that belonged not to an announcer—but to someone familiar to Ayato and Julis.

"Er, ahem. Ayato, Julis, can you hear me?" The calm, gentle voice

was unmistakably Claudia's. *"Flora is safe. You can put your minds at ease. And—fight to the very best of your abilities."*

It was clear that Ayato, Julis, Ardy, and everyone else in the arena were stunned.

"Hee-hee. Well, then. Sorry for the intrusion."

"Whaaat?! Th-that was the student council president of Seidoukan Academy just now, wasn't it?!"

"Uh, yep, looks like. I think that was Miss Claudia Enfield herself."

The announcers and the spectators were still confused over the sudden intrusion, especially since her statements were meaningless to them all.

Ayato and Julis alone stared at each other and burst out laughing.

"Pfft, ha-ha-ha-ha! That was over the top, even for her!" Julis exclaimed.

"I can't believe she barged into the broadcasting booth just to inform us," Ayato said.

True, there was no other way to contact fighters in the middle of a match. Claudia might be reprimanded for violating some Festa regulation, but they knew she had done it for their sakes.

"Well, if she went that far for us, we can't afford to lose."

“We have to win for Saya and Kirin, too,” Ayato agreed as he drew the activator from the holster at his waist.

Their friends had done their part, and now it was time to do theirs.

“Hrm, I haven’t the faintest idea what that was about—but all I can do is fight to the best of *my* ability!” Ardy aimed his hammer at Ayato and Julis, and the hammerhead began spinning furiously. “Wolnir Hammer, firing!”

With a low boom, the hammerhead sped toward them.

But Ayato calmly activated his Orga Lux with its deep red urmmanadite. “…Ready, Ser Veresta?”

A blade of pure white, swathed in symbols of jet-black.

With a single stroke, the enormous single-edged sword cleaved the hammerhead in half, as well as every last one of the barriers surrounding Ayato and Julis.

“Payback time.”

*

“Can’t you do something, Ernesta?!”

In the private spectator booth reserved for Allekant Académie, Camilla fretted at her partner.

“Wellll, you might think so, but…”

“You know as well as I do that these numbers shouldn’t be rising like this! You have to shut it down, now!”

Compared to Camilla’s intense face, Ernesta looked practically drowsy. “And you know that Rimcy transferred limit control over to him, Camilla. There’s nothing we can do now.”

“There’s still manual override.”

All Puppets were required to have a remote kill switch in case of emergency. Ardy was no exception.

“Oh, stop it. You want me to kill my own baby?”

Using the override, however, would damage the Puppet’s CPU, and there was a high probability of irreparably corrupting the software as well.

“You have to, if it’s necessary. That responsibility is yours.”

“Responsibility, huh?” Ernesta sounded rather put out, then faced Camilla with a slightly more serious expression. “But even

now, I have faith."

"Faith? In what? In yourself, his maker?"

Ernesta only shrugged.

Camilla glared at her for a while, then finally let out a deep sigh and sat back in her seat. "It's a reckless gamble, if you ask me."

"Hee-hee, haven't I told you before? Life is nothing but a series of gambles."

"All winning streaks come to an end," Camilla scolded, although she looked resigned.

Ernesta grinned. "I guess they do. But otherwise, it wouldn't be any fun, right?"

*

Ayato gripped the Ser Veresta and closed in fast on his opponent.

The robot activated his defensive barriers again to block Ayato's path, but the youth easily cut through them, one after the other.

"I see. So this output isn't enough to stop you. Well, then!"

With a battle cry and superhuman speed, Ayato leaped into close range and swung the Ser Veresta up from below. Ardy's armor was thick, but for the Ser Veresta, which could burn through even his defensive barriers, it might as well have been made of paper.

The timing was perfect. Ardy had no way to defend against the charge.

Or so Ayato had thought.

With a ferocious groan of effort, Ardy used his hammer to deflect the Ser Veresta.

"Wha—?!"

Ayato stared in shock. What was he even looking at? He had just destroyed the hammerhead, and yet—

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! You'd be wise not to underestimate my barriers!" Ardy shouted. "If a single barrier can't stop you, I can compress them together, and not even the Ser Veresta can break through so easily!"

"So that's what you did." Ayato saw multiple sheets of light layered at the end of the shaft where the hammerhead should have been. "But in that case…!"

If Ardy was using his barriers in place of a weapon, then Ayato had nullified his defense.

Just one strike. All he needed was to reach Ardy's school crest.

"Hyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Raaaaaaaaaah!"

Both fighters roared as the Ser Veresta and the hammer clashed in a burst of sparks.

When Ayato slashed diagonally down with his Lux, Ardy deflected it upward. When Ardy thrust with his hammer, Ayato parried. They struck at each other dozens of times, neither budging an inch.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is fun! So much fun! But I'm not done yet! You still haven't seen my full strength!"

But…

"You'd be wise not to forget me!" With the Aspera Spina, Julis traced a magic circle in the air, and an enormous dragon made of flames took shape. "Burst into bloom—*Antirrhinum Majus!*"

The fiery dragon spread its wings and lightly took to the air to attack Ardy from above.

Embroiled in the battle with Ayato, the robot had no way to defend himself. He deflected Ayato's latest attack, sprang back to distance himself, then gripped his hammer to face the dragon.

Ayato was not about to let this opportunity pass. "Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Earth-Piercing Hornet.*"

He held his weapon aloft with the blade pointed forward, then executed six consecutive thrusts.

It would be possible for Ardy to deal with Ayato's attack or Julis's dragon, but not both at once.

"Raaaaagh! This is not overrrrrr!" He roared even louder, and blue light erupted from all over his body. The tremendous force sent Ayato flying back, and it blew away the dragon of flames, too.

A blue light…?! So that's what this is…!

Ayato barely managed to regain his balance before landing, and Julis ran over to him. "You all right?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine…but this is gonna be tough," he replied, keeping an eye on Ardy.

The robot's howl was relentless, and the blue glow only grew brighter. An invisible force was swirling around him—they could not get close again.

"But what is that…?"

"Don't you see it, Julis? How similar that is…?"

"What do you mean?"

“I should’ve seen it earlier. No matter how strong those barriers are, there’s no way he should be able to fight the Ser Veresta head-on. The only weapon we’ve seen that could pull that off was…”

Looking astonished as the answer occurred to her, Julis finished Ayato’s sentence. “…the Gravisheath.”

“Right.” Ayato nodded to her. “Only another Orga Lux could defend against the Ser Veresta.”

The Ser Veresta was one of the Runeswords—it burned through everything, impossible to defend against. Irene’s Gravisheath, which they’d faced in the fourth round of the tournament, had been the only weapon that could withstand attacks from the Ser Veresta.

“So Ardy must be using an urm-manadite for a power source,” Ayato concluded.

All ordinary manadites gave off a green glow. Only urm-manadites glowed in other colors. While it wouldn’t be impossible to add color artificially, that clearly wasn’t the case for Ardy’s blue aura.

“But—does that mean Ardy is an Orga Lux himself…?” Julis wondered, chilled.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know if it’s correct to call him one—but we can assume that at least the barriers are generated by an Orga Lux.”

That would explain everything.

Ardy combining with Rimcy was a way to channel the urm-manadite as a power source—or rather, to use multiple manadites to control the urm-manadite’s excessive output. In other words, one of the modules he’d received from Rimcy was a regulatory device.

“Wait!” Julis cried. “Does that mean— Is Ardy going out of control right now?!”

The color drained from her face as she recalled the match against Irene. It was true that the current situation bore a close resemblance to when the Gravisheath ran amok.

But Ayato’s assessment was different. “It looks like Ardy has more power than he can control, but I think—”

Before he finished his thought, Ardy’s roar abruptly stopped. The raging force field vanished, and a sudden calm descended on the arena.

But Ardy’s blue light still radiated freely, continuing to grow in intensity. “…Ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now I see! This—this is my power! No wonder Master sought to keep it in check!”

“Did he manage to contain it…?” Julis’s eyes went round.

Ayato, however, had vaguely suspected this.

The amount of power that could be drawn from an Orga Lux depended on the compatibility between the user and the urm-manadite. Obviously, Ernesta would have considered this. Ayato speculated that Ardy’s personality had been attuned to the urm-manadite’s.

“Well, as much as I hate to—I think it is time we finished this!”

As Ardy spoke, Ayato noticed that countless cracks had appeared in his armor, revealing the same blue light. His body was unable to withstand the energy output.

“Here I come!”

The Puppet showed no hesitation as he formed another hammerhead of barriers and charged. Ayato readied the Ser Veresta at his side to face him.

“Raaagh!”

“Ngh!”

Ardy’s attack was clearly faster and heavier than when they had faced each other moments before. Wielding the enormous hammer should have posed a significant difficulty, but Ardy’s overwhelming power output and learning capacity allowed him to overcome it.

After exchanging several strikes, Ayato found himself on the defensive. Although not as large as the hammer, the size of the Ser Veresta was slowing him down. He could barely keep up with Ardy’s newfound speed.

It’s only a matter of time before he overtakes me…!

“Ayato, get back!” Julis cried sharply.

Quickly realizing what she meant, Ayato used the flat of the Ser Veresta to block Ardy’s swinging hammer and let the momentum carry him into a backward leap.

“Hmm, something else up your sleeve?” Ardy rumbled, sounding amused. “Very well, I shall prove to you that nothing will work on me now!”

“Oh, is that so? Then take this!” Julis swung the Aspera Spina down as a giant magic circle lit up at Ardy’s feet.

“Blossom—*Rafflesia!*”

A fiery flower of extraordinary size materialized in front of Ardy’s face and began expanding.

But their opponent only bellowed with laughter. “Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Look well! See what I can do in this state!”

Defensive barriers materialized in four directions, boxing in the flower and crushing its petals.

Flames and explosions raged inside the box, but the barriers did not give in the least.

“That’s not possible…,” Julis muttered, stupefied.

Her shock was understandable, since the Rafflesia was her most powerful conditional move. The Gravisheath had defended against it once, but only partially. This total shutdown of her technique came as an unwelcome surprise.

“Now it’s my turn!” Ardy held out his palm, and barriers formed and layered atop one another to form a massive sphere. An enormous amount of energy began pouring into it. He was directing the output of the urm-manadite there—a ball of raw power.

Then Ardy closed his hand, and the sphere shrank to fit inside his fist.

“No way…!” Ayato’s instincts screamed that he was in extreme and immediate danger—but there was nothing he could do.

“And now— Explode!”

When Ardy opened his fist, all the condensed energy was released at once.

The violent explosion engulfed the whole arena. There was nowhere to run.

“—”

The flash turned Ayato’s field of vision to blank white, and the roar of the explosion drowned out Julis’s scream.

After being blown away like so much dust, he almost lost consciousness. Luckily—if it could be called lucky—the searing pain running through his body forced him to stay awake.

“Guh…agh…”

With a groan, Ayato managed to prop himself up and ascertain the situation. His school uniform with its reinforced composite fabrics was ripped in several places, but the crest was intact despite a few cracks. Had he protected it subconsciously?

He looked around in relief and froze.

The arena before him was completely destroyed.

The ground was carved out into a crater, baring the artificial soil designed to absorb impact. Even the defensive barriers protecting the spectator stands were sparking here and there.

Only a small space at the center of the explosion remained unscathed. Countless barriers covered Ardy with a dome of defense.

He was standing in the middle of that explosion—and he's not even scratched?

That meant Ardy's barrier might be strong enough to withstand the Ser Veresta. Things could be different if Ayato were able to draw out the full power of the sword, but at the moment, he was no match for Ardy wielding his urm-manadite to the fullest.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Let us continue! I'm still—" Suddenly, Ardy dropped to his knees. "Hrm…?"

Was it was deterioration due to the urm-manadite's elevated output? His legs were discharging blue sparks.

Ardy did not appear to be too seriously hurt, but Ayato was glad for the time it bought him to regroup. If an attack had come then, he wouldn't have been ready to defend himself.

"Ayato, how are you doing…?"

Ayato turned around at the faint voice to see Julis dragging herself up. But with an agonized expression, she immediately dropped to the ground again.

"Julis!"

"I-I'm fine…is what I'd like to say, but obviously, that would be a stretch…" As Ayato supported her, Julis lay weak in his arms, smiling ruefully. "Tell me the truth… Do you think we can still win?"

"…Well, I don't think it's completely hopeless."

If they could keep buying time, it seemed likely that Ardy would break down.

But actually, he doubted they could get that much time. They were already at the limits of what they could endure. He did still have prana to spare, but the cumulative damage had worn down his stamina.

He could cross weapons with Ardy perhaps ten or twelve more times.

"That doesn't sound terribly realistic," Julis said. "Do you have anything else?"

"If I could just move faster than he does, I'd have a shot at finishing him off…"

But he was trailing in speed, and he couldn't even dive in for one final charge.

He might try a Meteor Arts move—but while that would make his attack stronger, it would also make the sword larger, slowing him down even more. He'd never be able to hit Ardy.

“Faster…” Julis looked up at him with a gasp, as if she’d thought of something important. “I remember Claudia saying that the Ser Veresta assumes a shape that’s best for the one who wields it. But its current form isn’t exactly meeting that criterion. If we could do something to fix that, would it help?”

“I mean, it’s a good idea, but…”

“You made it larger to use a Meteor Arts technique. Isn’t that essentially the same thing?”

She made it sound easy, but in fact all Ayato had done then was to pour in his prana.

“I’m bad at fine-tuning my prana,” he pointed out. “*Really* bad.”

“Hmm…” Julis thought for a bit, then told him with firm resolve, “All right. I’ll do that part.”

“Huh?”

“Let me touch the Ser Veresta for a second.” Ignoring his bewilderment, Julis reached for the Lux in his grip.

“Hey, wait—!”

Wincing in pain, the girl quickly let go of the sword. She had touched it for only a moment, but her palm was hideously burned. “Heh… It is hard to handle. It won’t let just anyone so much as touch it. Well, a Strega like me would never be able to use it.”

She had told Ayato before that most Dantes and Stregas could not use an Orga Lux.

“No matter,” she went on. “That should be enough. Ayato, try using a Meteor Arts technique.”

“Meteor Arts? Now?”

She nodded, and Ayato poured his prana into the sword in his hand. In response, the blade lengthened. Julis placed her right hand atop his.

“Julis…?”

“Burst into bloom—*Alexandrit.*”

Julis’s prana flowed through Ayato’s right arm, and bright flames coiled around the Ser Veresta’s blade.

“What’s this…?”

“It’s a technique to wrap a weapon in fire,” she replied, “but now I’ll use it to help you control your prana. All you have to do is pour it in.”

“O-okay…!” Ayato put his faith in Julis and obeyed. The Ser Veresta abruptly stopped growing.

“Ayato, *imagine* it. The shape and size easiest for you to use—

the ideal form for the Ser Veresta."

"…"

He kept silent and pictured it.

Julis's flames wrapped around the blade in a spiral and squeezed it; then black symbols did the same.

The urm-manadite core glowed stronger and shook with a low growl.

At last, the Ser Veresta transformed into a slender, supple weapon a little larger than Kirin's Senbakiri. Along the length of its blade, the black symbols and flames intertwined to create a wondrously beautiful weapon.

"Phew… There. This is your—Ayato Amagiri's—Ser Veresta." Julis exhaled heavily and gave him a faint smile.

"It's…," he said in wonder.

"That's all I can do in this match. I'm leaving the rest to you, Ayato."

"…Got it, Julis." Ayato gently laid her down and swung the Ser Veresta toward Ardy, facing his opponent once more.

"Sorry to make you wait," he said.

"Not to worry. I had a slight malfunction on my part as well. I had to make some stopgap repairs."

Ayato walked slowly to the center of the stage—or rather, the field of dirt scattered with pieces of the stage.

Opposite him, Ardy also advanced at a steady pace. The two came in range, and—

They closed in, clashing in the middle of the stage.

With a ferocious shout, Ayato swung the Ser Veresta.

This is amazing! I can't believe how light it feels; it works so much better!

It seemed like his sword was twice as fast.

Ardy barely blocked the strike with his hammer, but the head made of barriers was knocked away—and not cut through; it was simply melted and repelled by the heat.

"What—?!" He started, but he quickly rematerialized his weapon and brought it down.

Even if Ayato had eliminated his disadvantage in speed and improved his weapon enough to win, one blow from his opponent would be the end. He didn't have the stamina to continue parrying and countering.

I have to settle this now—!

Ayato barely dodged the attack, then made a thrust at the crest on Ardy's chest with all his might. But the hammer blasted through the bottom of the stage.

"Guh!"

Ayato leaped away from the chasm opening at his feet as Ardy launched into the air with his flight unit and locked onto his opponent.

"I have you now!"

His hammer rushed at Ayato with a force that might have crushed the wind itself—but Ayato used the flying fragments of the stage to leap even higher. He felt as if his body was surpassing its own limits, but he was confident that he had the ability now to make that possible.

He used *shiki* to grasp where the largest fragments were, and he sprang from one to another to get behind his victim.

"Raaaagh! Not so fast!" Ardy roared. His blue aura shone even brighter, and his flight unit fired like a rocket to turn him around. At the same time, Ardy swung his hammer sideways to meet his foe.

But—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Master Technique—*Hellmoon!*"

Ayato had already leaped in under Ardy's guard.

As the hammer shattered the broken slab where Ayato had just been, the Ser Veresta traced a half-moon arc.

The two fighters passed each other in midair and, unable to land properly, crashed into the ground with impressive plumes of dust.

Ayato lay on his back, panting, pushed too hard for too long. He could no longer stand up, let alone swing his sword again. All he could see was one bright light on the distant ceiling shining down straight at him.

What had happened to Ardy? Had the Ser Veresta reached him?

He didn't have the energy to look. But he didn't have to—the automated announcements let him know instead.

"Ernesta Kühne—badge broken."

"End of match! Winners: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

As silence settled over the arena, a more human-sounding mechanical voice burst into laughter. "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I've suffered a crushing defeat!"

The applause began with a few scattered claps, but it gradually swelled into a thunderous cheer.

"*At…At last! At last it's decided! We have our winners! At the end of this incredible battle, the champions of the Phoenix are Amagiri and Riessfeld of Seidoukan Academy!*"

"*Well, I was completely lost in it there, so. That was a fantastic fight, just what a championship match should be!*"

Cheers and applause, ovations and whistles, the voices of the two announcers. As the adulation washed over Ayato, he slowly closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

CHAPTER 7
CEREMONIES

Since the stage in the Sirius Dome was now in no condition to serve as a venue, the closing ceremonies were hastily moved to the Procyon Dome. Fewer students would participate compared to the opening ceremony, so a slightly smaller venue would not pose a problem.

In fact, only the champions and the second-place team were to participate in the award ceremony, which did nothing to make Ayato more comfortable on stage. After the match, Julis had been immediately taken to the therapy center, and Ernesta had hauled Ardy off to the lab—meaning that at this moment, the only contestants on the stage were Ayato, Camilla, and Rimcy.

Meanwhile, the stands were packed to the brim with people. Anyone could attend the ceremonies (as capacity allowed), and the more entertaining the championship match, the more people stayed for the closing ceremonies. The full house proved that the spectators had been very happy with the battle.

"…And all of this only goes to show how splendid this Phoenix tournament was. In particular, the special provisions for the two fighters from Allekant Académie, while implemented strictly on a trial basis, are sure to have significant impact on the rules for future tournaments…"

Up on the dais, the Executive Committee chairman, Madiath Mesa, was presenting his thoughts on the tournament. Whereas his words at the opening ceremonies had been directed primarily to the students, now he was speaking to the audience, here and at home. He sounded slightly more formal.

The student council presidents of each school were also lined up on the dais. As Ayato scanned their faces, his eyes met those of the president of the Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

Sylvia gave him a tiny smile and a mischievous wink. Ayato's heart skipped a beat, but she quickly looked away.

Just as reality set in that this girl was *the* Sylvia Lyyneheym, he saw that others had their eyes on him, too—namely, the student council presidents of St. Gallardworth Academy and Jie Long Seventh Institute. The latter's eyes were sparkling, which was unnerving.

In contrast, the student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute, Dirk Eberwein, did not even glance his way. They had no proof that Dirk was behind the earlier incident; they'd simply have to await the findings of the city guard's investigation.

Claudia had contacted the guard once she was told that Flora had been rescued. She took Julis's place at Ayato's side for the post-match interview, and there, she revealed the kidnapping to the public. The press conference room erupted into chaos, such that extra time had to be allotted for the interview, and the award ceremony—originally scheduled for early evening—was now taking place so late that it was completely dark out.

It seemed Claudia had received a stern dressing-down for failing to report the kidnapping right away.

"Now, let us welcome the winning and runner-up teams of the Twenty-fourth Phoenix tournament. Please step up, all three of you."

Beckoned by Madiath, Ayato climbed the dais to loud applause from the stands.

"First, I commend the distinguished skill and determination of Camilla Pareto and Ernesta Kühne, alongside the splendid performance of Ardy and Rimcy. Congratulations." Madiath shook hands with Camilla and handed her a large trophy.

"It's an honor, chairman," she replied.

"I don't think it's an understatement to say that your contributions mark a new chapter in the history of the Festa. We must continue to evolve, and to do that, we need talents like yours. I look forward to seeing your future accomplishments." Madiath then faced Rimcy to shake her hand. "I can't say how Puppets will be treated in the Festa going forward, but your performance in this tournament is sure to play a significant role in deciding that."

"…Much appreciated, sir," Rimcy said with her usual cool expression.

"And I commend the unbreakable spirit and glorious victory of Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

Madiath's strong hand gripped his. "You persevered despite the interference against you in the championship. You are truly deserving of this trophy. We on the Executive Committee promise to fully cooperate with the city guard to uncover the truth. Rest assured that something like this will never happen again."

"Thank you."

The trophy was carved with a hexagonal emblem, the symbol of Asterisk. It was bigger than the one Camilla held and massively heavy in Ayato's hands.

"I personally enjoyed your match very much. I'm looking forward to seeing you fight again in the next Festa."

"Uh—yes, sir…"

Madiath nodded to him with a smile and placed a hand on Ayato's shoulder, prompting him to turn around. It was then that Ayato saw the gaggle of reporters surrounding the stage.

"Now—let us applaud the fighters who won our hearts and provided us with unparalleled excitement and drama!"

On Madiath's cue, the entire arena burst into thunderous cheers and applause.

It was the greatest and most passionate ovation since the Phoenix had begun. He felt like he was in the eye of a typhoon.

Even as he stood there blankly, at a loss for how to respond to the adoration, Ayato was experiencing the satisfaction of a task accomplished.

With the award ceremony concluded, Ayato and Claudia headed to the prep room together.

"What would you like to do now?" Claudia asked. "There's a reception, but your attendance isn't mandatory."

"Then I'd like to head to the therapy center. I want to see how Julis and Kirin are doing."

He knew the former was hurt pretty badly, but he had heard that Kirin's condition was even worse. There was no danger to her life, but even with the treatments available at the therapy center and a Genestella's recuperative capacity, it would be several days

before she was discharged. *She really must have fought hard to rescue Flora*, he thought.

"…Ayato!" Saya, who had been waiting in front of the prep room door, trotted up to him. "Congrats on the championship. That's my Ayato."

"We couldn't have done it without you," he said. "Thanks."

Saya shook her head, uncharacteristically embarrassed. "…It wasn't just me. Kirin and Yabuki helped, and even MacPhail."

"Lester did?"

"Yup." Saya pointed behind her, to where he could see Lester's back in the shadow of a pillar.

"Thanks, Lester," Ayato told him. "You really helped us out."

"D-don't be thankin' me! I only pitched in because Yabuki threatened me!" Lester shouted back bluntly, staunchly facing away.

"Ha-ha… Hey, wait. Where is Yabuki?" Ayato looked around.

There was no sign of Eishirou.

"The little rat ran off in the middle of the fight! Calls me in to help and then runs off… He's gonna regret it when I catch up with him." Lester's voice trembled with anger. He seemed to be genuinely upset—not that he was unjustified.

"…Sorry, Ayato. We couldn't catch the kidnapper." Dejected, Saya hung her head.

"You don't have to apologize. Everyone is safe. That's what matters."

Ayato had already heard from Claudia that although Saya and Kirin had defeated the kidnapper, he'd disappeared.

He must have gotten away while the rest were busy dealing with Kirin's injury and reporting to Claudia. Ayato was unconcerned about that.

Of course, if they could apprehend the culprit, they might have been able to press Le Wolfe for scheming behind the scenes. But Ayato was just glad his friends were safe.

"Oh, so we're headed to the therapy center," Ayato said. "What about you guys?"

"…Me too. Kirin was acting tough, but that injury was more than a scratch." Saya's brows drew together with concern. "I want to see how she's doing."

"I'm going home. I don't have time to run around with you people." Still not turning toward Ayato, Lester waved and began to

leave. But he paused. “Right— Well anyway, I’ll just say… congrats.”

Then he left—rather hastily, it seemed to Ayato.

“Oh, Mr. MacPhail has to be so aloof,” Claudia said with a soft laugh. “Well, let me arrange transportation to the therapy center. Just a moment.”

She took out her mobile to contact someone.

While they waited, Saya and Ayato were chatting about the championship match when something down the corridor caught her attention. “…Hmm?”

Ayato followed her line of sight to find Camilla and Rimcy heading toward them.

“…What do you want?” Saya asked.

“I’m here to retract what I said to you before,” Camilla said.

Saya’s eyes went wide. “…I don’t see why. It was Ayato and Julis who beat you. *We* lost.”

“I’m not referring to the championship, but the semifinal match from yesterday. You, and Dr. Sasamiya’s Lux, outperformed Rimcy here. That’s clear to anyone who watched.”

“…But we couldn’t beat Ardy,” Saya mumbled in frustration.

Camilla continued without missing a beat. “I’m sure you’ve figured this out, but Ardy’s barriers emulate the powers of an urm-manadite. With some confidence, I can call that defensive system my greatest work—but Ardy, after combining, is something entirely different. In that state, he draws energy directly from the urm-manadite to use its powers. It’s virtually the same as using an Orga Lux. But the guiding principles of our Ferrovius faction are incompatible with something as unstable as an Orga.” She sighed, shaking her head regretfully. “And so on a personal level, I can’t accept that match as a victory.”

“But—”

“I’m not the only one who feels that way,” Camilla said, cutting off Saya’s protest and then stepping aside to make way.

It was Rimcy who stepped forward. “Saya Sasamiya, I wish for a rematch against you.”

“A rematch…?”

“Well, the current rules don’t allow for our little ones to duel,” Camilla added. “So who knows when that might be…”

Saya took this in with blank surprise, but then the corners of her mouth softened into a smile. “All right. Then I’ll suspend your

retraction until that day comes."

"…What do you mean?" Now it was Camilla's turn to be startled.

"I have my pride, too," Saya replied. "I can't accept that as a victory, either."

"But—"

"Don't worry. Next time, I'll crush you into the ground." Saya smirked.

Camilla smiled thinly in return. "…I see. Then we will strive to fly even higher."

"Indeed." Rimcy alone maintained an aloof expression, but Ayato thought he sensed her fierce fighting will.

*

The underground blocks of Asterisk were the domain of the Infrastructure and Maintenance Department. Frequent regular inspections made them less than ideal hiding places for criminals and the like—but there were certain exceptions.

For instance, a fugitive with a thorough knowledge of the routes and schedules of said inspections could find them useful. They might not be any place to hide out long-term, but they were perfectly suitable as escape routes.

Wading in the knee-deep water, his arms hanging limply, the man picked his way through the labyrinth of sewers. There were lights on the walls, with a fair amount of distance between them, but the illumination was too weak for him to see very far.

Undeterred, the man walked at a steady pace, then abruptly stopped.

"I'm impressed that you made it this far with those injuries."

"…"

The echoing voice was bright and airy, in contrast to the surroundings. "You're Grimalkin's Gold Eye Number Seven. Your name is—oh, yeah—Werner, right?"

Werner turned to see a boy with a friendly smile standing in the dark. "That scar on your face—I know you. You're one of Shadowstar's ninjas."

"Oh, you've heard of me? I'm flattered." With no hint of caution, the boy casually approached the man.

“Of course I have. In our profession, anyone who stands out quickly becomes the subject of rumor.” There was an inorganic chill to Werner’s emotionless voice. “I hear you don’t care for rules. You must be quite a headache for Seidoukan.”

“Well, I’ve got no comeback for a pro like you,” the other said blithely with a wry smile. “Still—isn’t it boring to just do as you’re told?”

“Who are you working for?”

“I wonder?” A hint of hostility came into the boy’s voice.

In the next instant, a spike shot out of the boy’s shadow to pierce him through the chest—or so it appeared.

Only his impaled uniform hung in the air. The boy had vanished.

“That was a displacement *jutsu*.”

“!”

Werner heard the boy speak from behind him, but he could not turn around. A hot shock ran through his torso, and lukewarm fluid surged into his throat.

He collapsed into the dingy water with an impressive splash.

If there had been enough light, one would have seen a fluid dyeing the sewer red.

The boy flicked the blood from his kunai knives.

“Now you know why I turned down the offer from your organization,” he told the man belatedly. Picking up his uniform with the gaping hole in it, he scowled. “Crap… This was brand new…”

In the basement block of Allekant Académie’s research lab…

“Oh, wow, you’re a *mess*. Looks like we’ll have to renovate your guts from the frame out.” Ernesta, in the midst of repairing Ardy, spoke jubilantly—totally at odds with what she was actually saying.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, I’d imagine so!” Opposite the reinforced glass window in the workshop, the limbless Ardy bellowed with laughter.

“But, y’know, if we want a material that can withstand the urm-manadite output, we have to make it from scratch. Even if we talk to the folks in the Sonnet faction, it’ll take some time… Ardy, you’re gonna have to put up with a temporary body for a while, okay?”

“Hmph! Nothing for it, I suppose!”

“Okay, so let’s start by— Now what?”

Just as Ernesta was about to get to work rebuilding him, a call reached her mobile.

“Well, well…” With a grin, she cut off the audio connection to the workshop before opening an air-window. “My esteemed Tyrant, how are you on this fine day? What can I do for Your Excellency?”

The portly young man on the screen answered her greeting with a noise of disgust. *“…Tch. You’re such a piece of work.”*

“Oh, come on! You’re the one who sent me a gift that turned out to be empty when I opened it.” Ernesta squirmed, fidgeting playfully.

“*Shut up, bitch*,” Dirk spat. *“You failed to cash in on the opportunity, and your stupid pile of scrap metal’s to blame.”*

“It’s not like I asked for that opportunity, you know.”

“Hmph. Whatever. I just want an answer on what we discussed the other day.”

“An answer?” Ernesta said, looking blank.

“Are you going to team up with us, or not?”

“Oh, that. Obviously the answer is *nein*. ” She made a big *X* with her arms. “You guys just aren’t my type.”

“The feeling’s mutual.” Dirk glared at her with open displeasure. *“But…are you sure you’ll be able to finish that third Puppet on your own?”*

“__”

The air around her grew tense. Ernesta maintained a smile, but her gaze sharpened. “Hmm—I see. Not bad. I didn’t even tell Camilla about her. You guys at Le Wolfe really are good at this game, huh?”

“Can’t find the right urm-manadite, can you? No surprise, since no one’s more tightfisted than Frauenlob when it comes to urm-manadites for use in the field. Bet you’ll have a hard time getting it from the research institute.”

“…”

“Well, things might be different if you’d won the Phoenix.”

“And? Le Wolfe isn’t any different when it comes to urm-manadites, is it? I wouldn’t wanna be stuck with an empty gift again.”

“Who said anything about us *getting it for you?”*

Ernesta frowned suspiciously, but she quickly guessed what he meant and smiled stiffly. “Oh, so the people behind your schemes?”

“No one’s backing us. We lend each other a hand when the situation calls for it. We’ve got interests in common, nothing more.”

“Uh-huh…,” Ernesta responded vaguely, then thought for a while.

“So? Can I have a damn answer already?”

“Okay. I’ll hear you out,” she said at length.

Even then, the irritated scowl remained plastered on Dirk’s face. *“Good. I’ll contact you later.”*

The air-window blinked off. Staring at the space where it had been, Ernesta let out a long sigh.

“Well, who knows what kind of trouble this’ll bring…,” she murmured, but before she knew it, her mouth had curled into a grin.

*

“A-Ayato— Ouch!”

As Ayato came into the room, Kirin jumped up from the bed at the sight of him—or she tried to, before grabbing her side in agony.

“Kirin, no, you shouldn’t get up!” Ayato ran to her.

“N-no, I’m fine—something like this will heal in no time.” She smiled even as tears of pain welled in the corners of her eyes.

“…It’s a serious injury. Don’t move around,” added Saya, coming in after Ayato.

“She’s right. Your body needs rest,” Claudia agreed.

“Oh, Saya, Miss President—thank you for coming.”

“Anyway, you’d better stay lying down,” Ayato finished.

“A-all right…” Kirin had to do as they all said.

There was another bed in the room, but it was empty.

“Huh?” Ayato wondered. “I thought Julis was supposed to be here with you…”

“Yes, she’s in another room right now. The city guard wanted to talk to her and Flora.”

“Oh. Actually, I’m supposed to talk with them later, too.”

Which was to say, they needed a report. He should probably head over to speak with them after meeting Kirin.

“Uh, um—Ayato?” Kirin looked straight into his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“My belated congratulations to you. I saw a video of your

match. It really was amazing!"

"Ha-ha, thanks. But we couldn't have won without you guys, Kirin. You did a great job."

He gently patted her head.

"N-no, I didn't, really…" Kirin's cheeks reddened, and she bashfully hid her face in the light blanket.

"…You should be proud," Saya added. "It was only because of you that we were able to beat that Dante. That sword-drawing technique at the end was awesome."

"A sword-drawing technique?" Ayato said, impressed. "Wow… I didn't know the Toudou style had one."

Kirin hid herself even deeper in the blankets. Now she was only visible from the eyes up. "Um, it—it's a technique that was developed in one of the branch dojos, and it's not taught in the main school. It was the first time I was able to execute it in a real fight…"

"I see… We have branch dojos, too, but nothing like that." Ayato could only imagine the logistical troubles with a school the size of the Toudou style.

"Oh! Ayato! What was the last technique you used in the championship?!" As soon as the topic turned to swordplay, Kirin popped her head up, eyes shining.

She did seem like a different person when they talked about swords. "You mean Hellmoon? I can't say too much, because it's a secret of the school, but—it's a move to cut through the enemy as you run past each other, without breaking stride."

It was a technique that required high dexterity, so the Ser Veresta's usual size would have been a problem.

"I see… It sounds like a technique from one of the old styles."

"Most of our master techniques were developed with multiple enemies in mind, but that one is a little different."

"By the way," Claudia said, abruptly cutting off their swordplay shop talk. "I have a question for you, Ayato. Do you mind?"

"Oh? Um, sure— What is it?"

"I noticed at the award ceremony… When did you become friends with Queenvale's student council president?"

"Wha—?!" Ayato was startled, but Saya and Kirin looked at him with even greater surprise.

"The president of Queenvale… Wait, whaaat?!" Kirin squeaked.

"…Sigrdrífa and Ayato?" Saya blurted.

“W-well, we’re just friends—or acquaintances, really, we just met—” Ayato flailed.

Claudia smiled her usual smile. “Oh, so you do know each other.”

“Uh…”

Man, I walked right into it.

“You trapped me, Claudia,” he sulked.

Her shoulders shook with an impish giggle. “Sorry. But I just had to know.”

“I want to know, too!” Kirin exclaimed. “How do you know Miss Sylvia, Ayato?”

“…Seriously, Ayato, I don’t even… Seriously!” Saya grumbled.

“Well, uh, the thing is…,” Ayato started. But he’d promised Sylvia—he couldn’t tell his friends what had really happened. *How do I talk my way out of this one…?*

Keenly aware of the three girls’ eyes on him, he tried to think, and then—

“What in the world are you people doing…?”

The door opened, and Julis and Flora joined them.

“Oh, hi, Julis. Are you done with the questions from the city guard?” Ayato asked her, desperate for a diversion.

“Mm-hmm. I told them in great detail what an evil, sadistic man Dirk Eberwein is,” Julis said with a satisfied look.

“That’s good, I guess—but I heard they were keeping you here, too. Is it okay for you to be walking around like this?”

“In my case, it was just prana depletion. I’ll only be here for a day, and I’ve already recovered a good deal. Sure, I have some bruises and fractures, but nothing that—hmm? What’s wrong, Flora?”

Flora stood still at the entrance, staring at the floor.

Julis called to her again, and she raised her head with determination on her face.

“Everyone, I—I’m so sorry for causing you so much trouble—!” Flora bunched the hem of her skirt in her fists, on the verge of tears.

“Flora, it wasn’t your fault at all—don’t worry about it,” Ayato said, rushing to comfort her.

“B-but it was a really important match for Master Amagiri and Her Highness—and Miss Toudou got hurt so badly…”

“I—I don’t mind, either!” Kirin protested, but fat tears welled

up in Flora's eyes.

"Oh, sweetie…" Julis spoke to Flora as if to calm a baby. "Stop trying so hard, Flora. You're mature for your age, but you're only ten. You can cry when you want to cry."

She tapped Flora affectionately on the head.

"But, but—"

"It's all right."

"Y-Your Highness—" Finally, the tears overflowed. She scrunched up her face and wailed. "Princess Juliiiis! I was so scaaared!"

Flora clung to Julis and burst into sobs.

"Yes, I know. You were really brave, Flora. You're all right now."

Flora screwed up her face with tears and snot, and she looked just like a girl her age. Julis continued gently stroking her back until her sobs subsided.

*

"So—Ayato, do you have a minute?"

After Flora had cried herself to sleep, Julis laid her down on the empty bed and pointed to the door.

"Sure, I've got time," Ayato said, "but where are we going?"

"Oh, just right over here." Julis led him a short distance outside the hospital room.

There was a waiting area with a vending machine and a sofa. There were spaces like these scattered throughout the facility, but perhaps because of the late hour, no one else was there.

"My treat. Anything you want," she said.

"All right. An iced coffee, then."

"Then I'll have some tea."

Ayato caught the can of iced coffee Julis tossed him. The cold felt pleasant against his hand.

"So?" he prompted her, thinking she must want to talk about something.

"Er…" Julis self-consciously fidgeted with her can of tea. After a while, she finally spoke. "Well, I did bring you here to talk to you. But now I don't know what to say…"

She fell silent again.

Neither sat on the sofa, but instead they leaned back against the wall side by side as minutes passed quietly.

Words tumbled out of her at last. "…I don't think I would have made it this far if not for you."

She did not turn toward Ayato, but gazed straight ahead.

"…Me too," he replied, facing the same way. "I don't think I would have even tried to come this far if not for you, Julis."

"But this is only one of the checkpoints," she warned. "We have a long road ahead."

"I'll be with you the whole way. For you, and for myself, too."

He had found the thing he had to do.

And now, they had to forge ahead to the next step.

"Yeah?"

"…Yeah."

Silence fell again. But this time, it was interrupted quickly.

"Then let's have a toast." Julis turned to Ayato and smiled softly. "To our victory today."

She raised her can.

"And to our next victory." Ayato touched his can to hers.

A low *tunk* echoed in the quiet hallway.

EPILOGUE

In the center of Asterisk's administrative area stood the Festa Executive Headquarters.

It was one of the tallest skyscrapers in Asterisk, and the office of Executive Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa was on its top floor.

The layout was similar to that of the student council room at Seidoukan Academy. The glass walls provided a complete view of Asterisk. All the furniture, including the sofas and desk, were of the finest quality, and overall, the room had a tranquil air.

Ayato and Julis faced Madiath in his office to hear his report on the earlier incident.

"Ah, thank you for coming," he welcomed them. "There was a lot going on with the Phoenix tournament, so it took us some time to sort through it all. Oh—please, have a seat."

They sat on the sofa across the table from him.

It had been a month since the Phoenix had ended. Their summer vacation of dawdling was already over, and the season had shifted into autumn.

"So, let me get straight to the point. Regarding the kidnapping of Miss Flora Klemm—I imagine you've already heard, but the leaders of the mafia group thought to be behind the crime were recently apprehended." Madiath exhaled quietly.

Frowning, Ayato and Julis waited for him to continue.

"They were running the casino where Miss Klemm was being held and were involved in many other illegal activities, including a betting house for the Phoenix. They had fixed the odds a little too high, so they really couldn't afford to have you two win. On the other hand, they would have had to refund the bets placed if you had forfeited. That was how they arrived at the idea to stop you from using the Ser Veresta. Most are denying the charges, but we

were able to collect solid evidence from their headquarters." Madiath slumped a little, smiling awkwardly. "You don't look very convinced."

"Of course not," Julis said. "It was obviously—"

"Please, just a moment. Needless to say, the city guard takes your testimony very seriously, and we're continuing to investigate along those lines. But we haven't been able to find this Dante whom Miss Sasamiya and Miss Toudou allegedly fought. And, I hope you'll forgive me for hesitating to name names, but nor can we find any evidence linking the crime to a specific school or to their intelligence apparatus."

Ayato could almost hear Julis grinding her teeth.

"Of course, many members of this mafia group are current Le Wolfe students. So on that point, the school bears some accountability. We're of course considering punishment, and depending on the outcome, severe penalties, such as deductions of Festa points, may be levied."

Deducting Festa points was a harsh punishment, but Le Wolfe had been subjected to it more than a few times in the past. Hardly anyone would blink if it happened again.

"I'm also told that the head of the city guard has taken a strong personal interest in this case. The investigation is expected to continue, so I must ask for your patience."

"…We understand." Julis nodded grudgingly. She was tired of being angry about this entire thing.

Ayato could sympathize, but if he was the target, then Julis and Flora were collateral damage. If Dirk got away with what he'd done, he wouldn't be able to let that slide.

"Speaking for the Executive Committee, this is an absolutely deplorable act. We're considering strengthening security for the contestants, and their families and friends." With that, Madiath stood. "If anything else comes up, please don't hesitate to contact me. If it's something in my power, I promise my utmost cooperation."

Ayato shook his extended hand, and Madiath's expression suddenly softened.

"By the way, Mr. Amagiri, I hear that you used your victor's wish to request a search for your sister."

"Huh…? Um, yes." The change of subject caught Ayato by surprise, but then he nodded.

Winners of a Festa tournament were granted any wish they desired.

That was the selling point for competing, anyway. In actuality, of course, there were limits.

It was impossible to bring the dead back to life, for instance; and even in this day and age most wishes that significantly violated another's human rights would not be granted. (Although it was said that there were plenty of loopholes around this latter stipulation.)

Julis had wished for money, as she had said she would, and the integrated enterprise foundation offered an incredible sum.

She used it to pay off the debts of several orphanages in Lieseltania and then bought the institutions. She was saving the rest for future administrative costs.

Ayato, for his part, had asked for his sister to be found. Unlike Julis's wish, there was no guarantee of results, but if the IEFs could not find her, there was nothing else he could do.

"If she went missing here in Asterisk, there must be a clue somewhere," Madiath said. "I'm praying for her safe return."

"Thank you."

There was something affectionate in Madiath's words.

Even though it puzzled him, he left the room with a polite bow.

"Phew…"

With a sigh, Madiath sat back down in his chair after seeing Ayato and Julis off.

At the same time, one of his many mobile devices signaled an incoming call, and he opened an air-window. "…You've certainly managed to make a lot of work for me."

"Peh! I was trying to do you a favor." The rusty-haired young man on the screen scoffed irritably.

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"You should know the power of the Ser Veresta better than anyone. And he's her brother. Sooner or later, he's gonna mess up the plan*."*

"Even so, your methods were too rough this time. I'd appreciate it if you exercised a little more restraint. Although I can see how you may have wanted to kill two birds with one stone by getting rid of unruly factions in the Rotlicht…"

As Madiath gave him a mild talking to, the young man only scowled deeper.

"I let them run around on purpose just for times like this. They have

to be useful once in a while. Still, I lost one of my Cats, so I'd say I barely broke even."

"Hmm… Well, no matter. I'll let this one slide. What happened with *her*?"

"I convinced her to hear us out…but are you sure about bringing her into this? She's better than that crazy bitch with Tenorio, but seriously, she's got a few screws loose herself."

"You saw what her Puppets can do. We need all the help we can get. Besides, I have no intention of telling her about the plan."

"…That would be smart."

"Well, I'm counting on you to carry out the negotiations. You know I can't get involved directly. We'll talk again."

But just as Madiath was about to end the call, the young man interrupted.

"By the way, you feel like explaining your relationship with that girl yet?"

"Really, this again?" Madiath made an exaggerated sigh and a forced smile. "Sorry, but I'm not going to tell you. It's a personal matter."

This time, he did end the call.

"He's more persistent than I thought…," he grumbled, then touched his mobile device again.

The dark air-window displayed a new image. But this time, it was not a call. It was a feed from a monitoring camera.

The screen displayed a lone girl, asleep on a large bed.

"Now, what's to be done about this…?"

Madiath let out another sigh as he gazed at the image of the sleeping girl—Haruka Amagiri.

AFTERWORD

Hello, Yuu Miyazaki here.

Here you have it, Volume 5 of *The Asterisk War*. I apologize for the long wait.

When I started to write *Asterisk*, I already had the outline planned to the end. But some things are bound to change as one writes. This volume's cover girl, Sylvia, for instance—she's one of the five heroines I had planned for the story. She was supposed to make her debut in the upcoming Gryps tournament, but we pushed her up to Volume 5 at the insistence of my previous editor, Mr. Iwaasa. Now that I've written it, I see he had the right idea.

And, as the readers who just finished this volume will know, this concludes the Phoenix arc of the story. In the next volume, after a brief digression (I say that, but it will be plenty significant to the plot), we'll start the Gryps arc. I hope you'll join us for the next phase of the story.

Once again, I'm so grateful to okiura for the amazing illustrations, starting with the brilliant cover art of Sylvia. We spent quite a bit of time going over her design, her weapon, her hair color… So I'm confident that it came out well. Our okiura really is great!

On top of all that, the first volume of *The Asterisk War* manga by Ningen came out recently. It's full of Julis and company looking fine and awesome in dynamic action, so please add it to your collection! And the series is running in *Monthly Comic Alive*!

Now, last but not least, so many people helped me get this volume out, too.

I'd like to thank the staff at Luckpim Publishing, for their help in the signings in Thailand, and similarly the staff at Sharp Point Press for the events in Taiwan.

To my new editor, Mr. Ikemoto, who rushed around to help after being assigned to me, thank you so much. I'm grateful to Ohrui, Shimizu, and the rest of the editorial staff—and more than anything, to my readers for your support.

Hope I'll see you all in the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
February 2014

characters

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

ERNESTA KÜHNE
A genius meteoric engineer, the pride of Allekant. Head of the Pygmalion faction.

CAMILLA PARETO
Specializes in Lux development, and inseparable from Ernesta. Head of the Ferrovius faction.

ARDY (AR-D)—"ABSOLUTE REFUSAL" DEFENDED MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

RIMCY (RM-C)—"RUINOUS MIGHT" CANNON MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
A devilishly clever young man known as the Devious King, Tyrant. The first non-Genestella student council president of Le Wolfe.

KORONA KASHIMARU
The student council president's secretary. Unranked, with no powers useful in battle despite being a Genestella.

IRENE URZAIZ
Ranked third at Le Wolfe. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamilexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Unranked. Irene's younger sister, and a regenerative (a Genestella with healing powers).

ST. GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Student council president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked first, alias the Paladin, Pendragon.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Student council vice president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked second, alias the Witch of Shining Wings, Glonana.

ELLIOT FORSTER & DOROTEO LEMUS
Gallardworth students who faced Julis and Ayato in the Phoenix semifinal match. Ranked twelfth and eleventh, respectively.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Student council president of Jie Long Seventh Institute. Successor to the alias Immanent Heaven, Banyuu Tenra and one of the strongest fighters in all Asterisk.

ZHAO HUFENG
Ranked fifth. An exceptional martial artist and Xinglou's star pupil. Alias the Peerless Thorn, Tenka Musou.

SHENYUN LI AND SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister, ranked ninth and tenth. Alias the Phantom Builder, Genei Souki, and the Phantom Vanisher, Gen'ei Musan, respectively.

SONG AND LUO
Pupils of Xinglou who faced Ayato and Julis in the fifth round of the Phoenix. Ranked twentieth and twenty-third at Jie Long.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
Student council president and first-ranked fighter at Queenvale, she placed second in the previous Lindvolus. Alias the Witch of Fearsome Melody, Sigrdrifa.

OTHERS

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Festa, granted full authority over the events by the six integrated enterprise foundations.

MICO YANASE
Announcer for the Phoenix events and a Queenvale alum.

PHAM THI TRAM
Commentator for the Phoenix events and a Jie Long alum, ranked twenty-fifth there.

FLORA KLEMM
A ten-year-old girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's older sister, missing for five years.

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